Nancy Drew

Mystery Stories

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Collection Volume

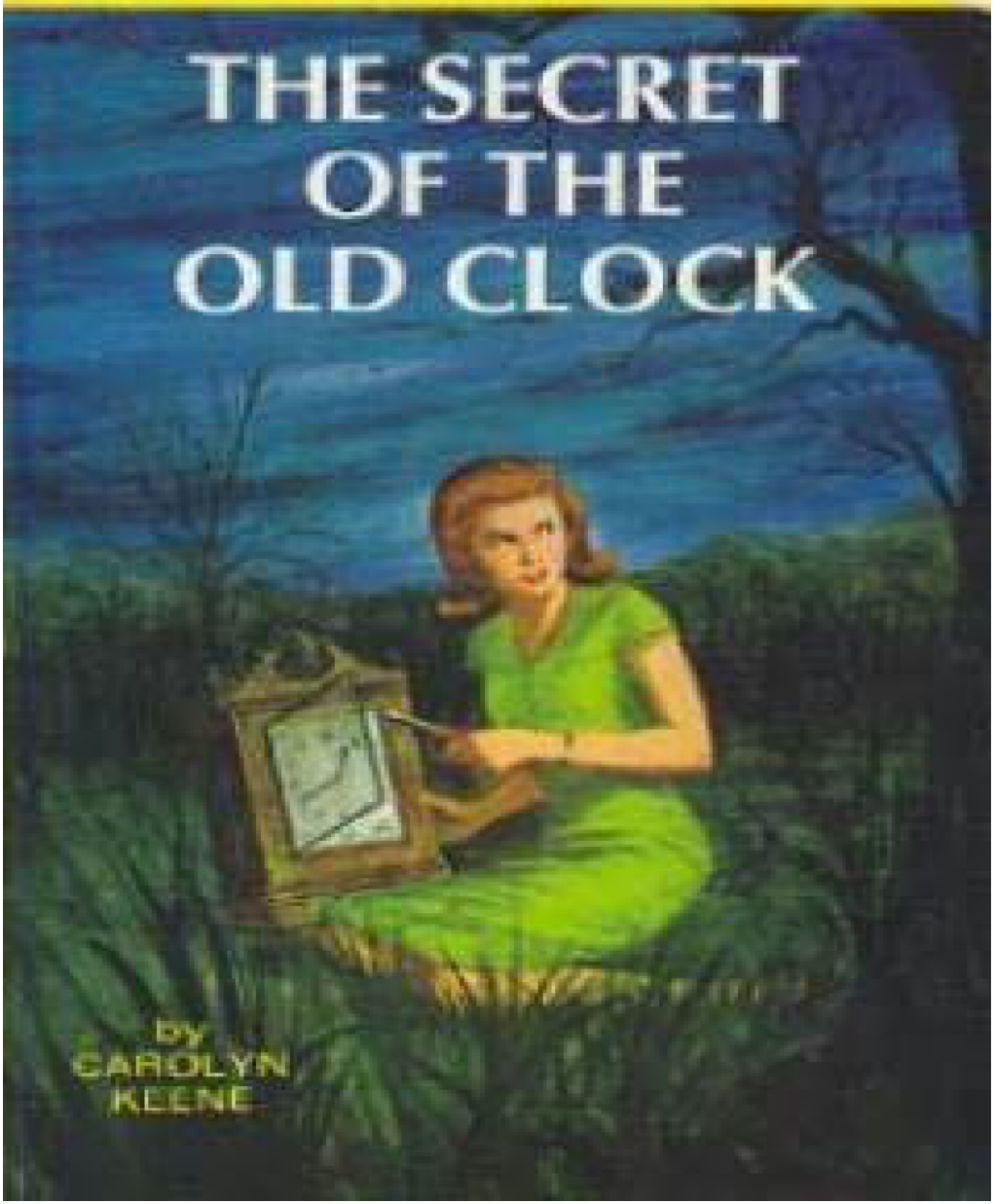
1 of 6

Contains Books

1-10

NANCY DREW MYSTERY STORIES 1

THE SECRET OF THE OLD CLOCK



BY CAROLYN KEENE

Carolyn Keene: The Secret of the Old Clock

Nancy Drew #1

CHAPTER I

The Rescue

NANCY DREW, an attractive girl of eighteen, was driving home along a country road in her new, dark-blue convertible. She had just delivered some legal papers for her father.

“It was sweet of Dad to give me this car for my birthday,” she thought. “And it’s fun to help him in his work.”

Her father, Carson Drew, a well-known lawyer in their home town of River Heights, frequently discussed puzzling aspects of cases with his blond, blue-eyed daughter.

Smiling, Nancy said to herself, “Dad depends on my intuition.”

An instant later she gasped in horror. From the lawn of a house just ahead of her a little girl about five years of age had darted into the roadway. A van, turning out of the driveway of the house, was barely fifty feet away from her. As the driver vigorously sounded the horn in warning, the child became confused and ran directly in front of the van. Miraculously, the little girl managed to cross the road safely and pull herself up onto a low wall, which formed one side Of a bridge. But the next second, as the van sped away, the child lost her balance and toppled off the wall out of sight!

“Oh my goodness!” Nancy cried out, slamming on her brakes. She had visions of the child plunging into the water below, perhaps striking her head fatally on a rock

Nancy leaped out of her car and dashed across the road. At the foot of the embankment, she could see the curly-haired little girl lying motionless, the right side of her body in the water.

“I hope” Nancy dared not complete the harrowing thought as she climbed down the steep slope.

When she reached the child, she saw to her great relief that the little girl was breathing normally and no water had entered her nose or mouth. A quick examination showed that she had suffered no broken bones.

Gently Nancy lifted the little girl, and holding her firmly in both arms,

struggled to the top of the embankment. Then she hurried across the road and up the driveway to the child's house.

At this moment the front door flew open and an elderly woman rushed out, crying, "Judy! Judy!"

"I'm sure she'll be all right," said Nancy quickly.

The woman, seeing Nancy's car, asked excitedly, "Did you run into her?"

"No, no. Judy fell off the bridge." Nancy quickly explained what had taken place.

By this time another woman, slightly younger, had hurried from the house. "Our baby! What has happened to her?"

As the woman reached out to take Judy, Nancy said soothingly, "Judy's going to be all right. I'll carry her into the house and lay her on a couch."

One of the women opened the screen door and the other directed, "This way."

Nancy carried her little burden through a hallway and into a small, old-fashioned living room. As soon as she laid the child on the couch, Judy began to murmur and turn her head from side to side.

"I believe she'll come to in a few minutes," said Nancy.

The two women watched Judy intently as they introduced themselves as Edna and Mary Turner, great-aunts of the little girl.

"Judy lives with us," explained Edna, the older sister. "We're bringing her up."

Nancy was somewhat surprised to hear that these elderly women were rearing such a small child. She gave her name and address, just as Judy opened her eyes and looked around. Seeing Nancy, she asked, "Who are you?"

"My name is Nancy. I'm glad to know you, Judy."

"Did you see me fall?"

Nancy nodded, as the child's Aunt Mary said, "She rescued you from the river after you fell in."

Judy began to cry. “I’ll never, never run into the road again, really I won’t!” she told her aunts.

Nancy said she was sure that Judy never would. She patted the child, who smiled up at her. Although Nancy felt that Judy would be all right, she decided to stay a few minutes longer to see if she could be of help. The child’s wet clothes were removed and a robe put on her.

Mary Turner started for the kitchen door. “I’d better get some medication and wet compresses for Judy. She’s getting a good-sized lump on her head. Nancy, will you come with me?”

She led the way to the kitchen and headed for a first-aid cabinet which hung on the wall.

“I want to apologize to you, Nancy, for thinking you hit Judy,” the woman said. “I guess Edna and I lost our heads. You see, Judy is very precious to us. We brought up her mother, who had been an only child and was orphaned when she was a little girl. The same thing happened to Judy. Her parents were killed in a boat explosion three years ago. The poor little girl has no close relatives except Edna and me.”

“Judy looks very healthy and happy,” Nancy said quickly, “so I’m sure she must love it here.”

Mary smiled. “We do the best we can on our small income. Sometimes it just doesn’t suffice, though. We sold some old furniture to the two men in that van you saw. I don’t know who they were, but I guess the price was all right.”

Mary Turner’s thoughts went back to little Judy. “She’s so little now that Edna and I are able to manage with our small income. But we worry about the future. We’re dressmakers but our fingers aren’t so nimble with the needle as they used to be.

“To tell you the truth, Nancy, at the time Judy’s parents were killed, Edna and I wondered whether we would be able to take care of Judy properly. But we decided to try it and now we wouldn’t part with her for anything in the world. She’s won our hearts completely.”

Nancy was touched by the story. She knew what was in the minds of the Turner sistersliving costs would become higher, and with their advancing years, their own income would become lower.

“Unfortunately,” Mary went on, “Judy’s parents left very little money.

But they were extremely bright people and Judy is going to be like them. She ought to study music and dancing, and have a college education. But I'm afraid we'll never be able to give her those things."

Nancy said reassuringly, "Judy may be able to win a scholarship, or get other financial aid."

Mary, finding Nancy a sympathetic listener, continued, "A cousin of our father's named Josiah Crowley used to help us. But he passed away a couple of months ago. For years he used to pay us long visits and was very generous with his money." Miss Turner sighed. "He always promised to remember us in his willhe loved little Judyand I am afraid Edna and I came to depend on that in our plans for her. But he did not carry out his promise."

Nancy smiled understandingly and made, no comment. But she did wonder why Mr. Crowley had changed his mind.

"Josiah went to live with some other cousins. After that, things changed. He rarely came to see us. But he was here just last February and said the same thingthat Edna and I were to inherit money from him. He had always helped us and it seemed strange that he should stop so suddenly."

Mary Turner looked at Nancy. "Maybe you know our well-to-do cousins that he went to stay with. They live in River Heights. They're the Richard Tophams."

"Do they have two daughters named Ada and Isabel?" Nancy asked. "If so, I know them."

"That's the family all right," replied Mary.

Nancy detected a hint of coolness in the woman's voice. "Do you like those two girls?" Miss Turner asked.

Nancy did not answer at once. She had been taught never to gossip. But finally she said tactfully, "Ada and Isabel were in high school with me. They were never my close friends. Weuhdidn't see eye to eye on various things."

By this time Mary Turner had selected a few items from the first-aid chest. Now she went to the refrigerator for some ice cubes. As she arranged the various articles on a tray, she said, "Well, when Cousin Josiah passed away, to our amazement Richard Topham produced a will which made him executor of the Crowley estate and left all the

money to him, his wife, and the two girls."

"Yes. I did read that in the newspaper," Nancy recalled. "Is the estate a large one?"

"I understand there's considerable money in it," Mary Turner replied. "Some of Josiah's other cousins say he told them the same thing he told us, and they are planning to go to court about the matter." The woman shrugged. "But I guess a fight to break the will would be hopeless. Nevertheless, Edna and I cannot help feeling there must be a later will, although as yet no one has presented it."

Nancy followed Miss Turner into the living room. The cold compresses helped to reduce the swelling where Judy had hit her head on a rock. Convinced now that the little girl was all right, Nancy said she must leave.

"Come to see me again soon," Judy spoke up. "I like you, Nancy. "You're my saving girl."

"You bet I'll come," Nancy answered. "I like you too. You're a good sport!"

The child's great-aunts profusely thanked Nancy again for rescuing Judy. The visitor had barely reached the door when Edna suddenly said, "Mary, where's our silver teapot?"

"Why, right there on the tea table Oh, it's gone!"

Edna ran into the dining room. "The silver candlesticks! They're gone too!"

Nancy had paused in the doorway, startled. "Do you mean the pieces have been stolen?" she asked.

"They must have been," replied Mary Turner, who was white with apprehension. "By those men who bought some furniture from us!"

Instantly Nancy thought of the men in the van. "Who were the men?" she asked.

"Oh, Mary, how could we have been so careless?" Edna Turner wailed. "We don't know who the men were. They just knocked on the door and asked if we had any old furniture that we wanted to sell. We'll never get the silver back!"

“Maybe you will!” said Nancy. “I’ll call the police.”

“Oh dear!” Mary said woefully. “Our phone is out of order.”

“Then I’ll try to catch up to the van!” Nancy declared. “What did the men look like?”

“They were short and heavy-set. One had dark hair, the other light. They had kind of large noses. That’s about all I noticed.”

“Me too,” said Edna.

With a hasty good-by Nancy dashed from the house and ran to her car.

CHAPTER II

A Missing Will

THE BLUE convertible sped along the country road. Nancy smiled grimly.

“I’m afraid I’m exceeding the speed limit,” she thought. “But I almost wish a trooper would stop me. Then I could tell him what happened to the poor Turner sisters.”

Nancy watched the tire marks which the van driven by the thieves had evidently made in the dirt road. But a few miles farther on a feeling of dismay came over her. She had reached a V-shaped intersection of two highways. Both roads were paved, and since no tire impressions could be seen, Nancy did not know which highway the thieves had taken.

“Oh dear!” she sighed. “Now what shall I do?”

Nancy concluded that her wisest move would be to take the road which led to River Heights. There was a State Police barracks just a few miles ahead.

“I’ll stop there and report the theft.”

She kept looking for the van, which she recalled as charcoal gray. “I wish I’d seen the license number or the name of the firm that owns the van,” Nancy said to herself ruefully.

When she reached State Police headquarters Nancy introduced herself to Captain Runcie and told about the robbery, giving what meager information she could about the suspects. The officer promised to send out an alarm immediately for the thieves and their charcoal-gray moving van.

Nancy continued her journey home, thinking of the Turners and their problems.

“I wonder why Mr. Josiah Crowley left all his money to the Tophams and none to his other relatives. Why did he change his mind? Those Tophams are well to do and don’t need money as much as the Turners.”

Nancy did not know Richard Topham, but she was acquainted with his wife, as well as his daughters. They were arrogant and unreasonable, and disliked by many of the shopkeepers in town. Ada and Isabel had been unpopular in high school. They had talked incessantly of money and social position, making themselves very obnoxious to the other students.

"I wonder," Nancy thought, "if a way can't be found so the Turners could get a share of the Crowley money. I'll ask Dad."

Five minutes later Nancy pulled into the double garage and hurried across the lawn to the kitchen door of the Drews' large red-brick house. The building stood well back from the street, and was surrounded by tall," beautiful trees.

"Hello, Nancy," greeted the pleasant, slightly plump woman who opened the door. She was Hannah Gruen, housekeeper for the Drews, who had helped rear Nancy since the death of the girl's own mother many years before.

Nancy gave her a hug, then asked, "Dad home? I see his car is in the garage."

"Your father's in the living room and dinner will be ready in a few minutes."

Nancy went to say hello to her tall, handsome father, then hurried to wash her hands and comb her hair before the three who formed the Drew household sat down to dinner. During the meal Nancy related her adventure of the afternoon.

"What tricky thieves!" Hannah Gruen burst out. "Oh, I hope the police capture them!"

"They certainly took advantage of those Turner sisters," Mr. Drew commented.

"Mary and Edna are in financial difficulties," Nancy commented. "Isn't it a shame that Josiah Crowley didn't bequeath some of his estate to the Turners and other relatives who need the money?"

Carson Drew smiled affectionately at his only child, then said, "Yes, it is, Nancy. But unless a will written later turns up, that's the way it has to be."

"The Turners think there is another will," Nancy told him. "Wouldn't

it be wonderful if it can be found?"

"I agree," spoke up Hannah. "It's well known in town that Mrs. Topham and her daughters were unkind to Josiah Crowley for some time before he died. Their excuse was that Josiah's eccentricities were extremely trying."

"The Tophams have never been noted for any charitable inclinations," Mr. Drew observed with a smile. "However, they did give Josiah a home."

"Only because they knew he was going to leave all his money to them," said Hannah. "If I'd been Josiah I wouldn't have stayed there." The housekeeper sighed. "But when people get old, they don't like change. And probably he put up with things rather than move."

She said the treatment the Tophams had accorded old Josiah Crowley had aroused a great deal of unfavorable comment throughout River Heights. Nancy had not known him personally, but she had often seen the elderly man on the street. Secretly she had regarded him as a rather nice, kindly person.

His wife had died during an influenza epidemic and after that he had made his home with various relatives. According to rumors, all these people had admitted that he had paid his board and done many favors for them. They in turn had been very kind to him, and though poor themselves, had tried to make Josiah Crowley comfortable and happy.

"Tell me everything you know about Mr. Crowley," Nancy urged her father.

The lawyer said that the old man had publicly declared he intended to provide in his will for several deserving relatives and friends. Then, three years before his death, the Topham family, who had never shown an interest in him, had experienced a sudden change of heart. They had begged Josiah Crowley to make his home with them, and at last he had consented. Shortly after he moved into the Topham house, Mr. Drew was told that the old man had decided to leave all his money to them.

Mr. Crowley, though failing in health, maintained a firm grip on life. But as time went on, he became more and more unhappy. He continued to live with the Tophams, but it was whispered about that he frequently slipped away to visit his other relatives and friends, and that he intended to change his will again.

“Then there must be a later will!” Nancy said hopefully.

Mr. Drew nodded, and went on, “One day Josiah Crowley became critically ill. Just before his death he attempted to communicate something to the doctor who attended him, but his words, other than ‘will,’ were unintelligible. After the funeral only one will came to light, giving the entire fortune to the Tophams.”

“Dad, do you suppose Mr. Crowley was trying to tell the doctor something about another will which he had put some place where the Tophams couldn’t find it?” Nancy asked.

“Very likely,” the lawyer replied. “Probably he intended to leave his money to relatives who had been kind to him. But fate cheated him of the opportunity.”

“Do you think anybody has looked for another will?” Nancy questioned.

“I don’t know. But I’m sure of this. If another will shows up, Richard Topham will fight it. The estate is a considerable one, I understand, and they aren’t the kind of people to share good fortune.”

“Can’t the present will be contested?” Nancy asked.

“I hear that other relatives have filed a claim, declaring they were told another will had been made in their favor. But unless it is located, I doubt that the matter will ever go further.”

“But the Tophams don’t deserve the fortune,” Hannah Gruen remarked. “And besides, they don’t need the money. It doesn’t seem fair.”

“It may not seem fair, but it is legal,” Mr. Drew told her, “and I’m afraid nothing can be done about the situation.”

“Poor Judy and her aunts!” said Nancy.

“There are others affected in the same -way,” her father remarked. “For instance, two young women who live on the River Road. I don’t know their names. I understand they were not related to Mr. Crowley, but were great favorites of his. They are having a struggle and could use some extra money.”

Nancy lapsed into silence. She felt strongly that a mystery lurked behind the Crowley case.

“Dad, don’t you believe Josiah Crowley made a second will?” Nancy questioned suddenly.

“You sound like a trial lawyer, the way you cross-examine me,” Mr. Drew protested, but with evident enjoyment. “To tell the truth, Nancy, I don’t know what to think, but something did happen which might indicate that Mr. Crowley at least intended to make another will.”

“Please go on!” Nancy begged impatiently.

“Well, one day nearly a year ago I was in the First National Bank when Crowley came in with Henry Rolsted.”

“The attorney who specializes in wills and other estate matters?” Nancy inquired.

“Yes. I had no intention of listening to their conversation, but I couldn’t help overhearing a few words that made me think they were discussing a will. Crowley made an appointment to call at Rolsted’s office the following day.”

“Oh!” cried Nancy excitedly. “That looks as though Mr. Crowley had made a new will, doesn’t it? But why didn’t Mr. Rolsted say something about it at the time of Mr. Crowley’s death?”

“For one of many reasons,” Mr. Drew replied. “In the first place, he may never have drawn a new will for Mr. Crowley. And even if he had, the old man might have changed his mind again and torn it up.”

Before Nancy spoke again, she finished the delicious apple pudding which Hannah had made. Then she looked thoughtfully at her father. “Dad, Mr. Rolsted is an old friend of yours, isn’t he?”

“Yes. An old friend and college classmate.”

“Then won’t you please ask him if he ever drew up a will for Mr. Crowley, or knows anything that might solve this mystery?”

“That’s a rather delicate question, young lady. He may tell me it’s none of my business!”

“You know he won’t. You’re such good friends he’ll understand why you’re taking a special interest in this case. Will you do it? Please!”

“I know you like to help people who are in trouble,” her father said. “I suppose I could invite Mr. Rolsted to have lunch with me tomorrow”

“Wonderful!” Nancy interrupted eagerly. “That would be a splendid opportunity to find out what he knows about a later will.”

“All right. I’ll try to arrange a date. How about joining us?”

Nancy’s face lighted up as she said, “Oh, thank you, Dad. I’d love to. I hope it can be tomorrow, so we won’t have to waste any time trying to find another will.”

Mr. Drew smiled. “We?” he said. “You mean you might try to find a hidden will if Mr. Crowley wrote one?”

“I might.” Nancy’s eyes sparkled in anticipation.

CHAPTER III

An Unpleasant Meeting

“WHAT are your plans for this morning, Nancy?” her father asked at the breakfast table.

“I thought I’d do a little shopping,” she replied. Her eyes twinkled. “There’s a dance coming up at the country club and I’d like to get a new dress.”

“Then will you phone me about lunch? Or better still, how about eating with me, whether Mr. Rolsted comes or not?”

“I’ll be there!” Nancy declared gaily.

“All right. Drop in at my office about twelve-thirty. If Mr. Rolsted does accept my invitation, we’ll try to find out something about Josiah Crowley’s wills.” Mr. Drew pushed back his chair. “I must hurry now or I’ll be late getting downtown.”

After her father had left, Nancy finished her breakfast, then went to the kitchen to help Hannah Gruen, who had already left the table.

“Any errands for me?” Nancy asked.

“Yes, dear. Here’s a list,” the housekeeper replied. “And good luck with your detective work.”

Hannah Gruen gazed at the girl affectionately and several thoughts raced through her mind. In school Nancy had been very popular and had made many friends. But through no fault of her own, she had made two enemies, Ada and Isabel Topham. This worried Hannah. The sisters, intensely jealous of Nancy, had tried to discredit her in positions she had held in school. But loyal friends had always sprung to Nancy’s defense. As a result, Ada and Isabel had become more unpleasant than ever to Nancy.

“Thanks for your encouragement,” she said to Hannah a little later, giving her a hug.

“Whatever you do, Nancy, beware of those Topham sisters. They’d be only too happy to make things difficult for you.”

“I promise to be on my guard.”

Before leaving the house, Nancy phoned the Turners. She was glad to hear that Judy had suffered no ill effects from her fall. But she was disappointed that the police had found no clue to the thieves who had stolen the silverware.

“Please let me know if you learn anything,” Nancy said, and Edna promised to do so.

Becomingly dressed in a tan cotton suit, Nancy set off in her convertible for the shopping district. She drove down the boulevard, and upon reaching the more congested streets, made her way skillfully through heavy traffic, then pulled into a parking lot.

“I think I’ll try Taylor’s Department Store first for a dress,” she decided.

Taylor’s was one of River Heights’ finest stores. Nancy purchased several items for Hannah on the main floor, then went directly to the misses’ wearing apparel section on the second floor.

Usually Nancy had no trouble finding a sales-clerk. But this particular morning seemed to be an especially busy one in the department, and an extra rush of customers had temporarily overwhelmed the sales force.

Nancy sat down in a convenient chair to await her turn. Her thoughts wandered to the Turner sisters and little Judy. Would she be able to help them? She was suddenly brought out of her reverie by loud-voiced complaints.

“We’ve been standing here nearly ten minutes!” a shrill voice declared. “Send a saleswoman to us immediately!”

Nancy turned to see Ada and Isabel Topham speaking to the floor manager.

“I’m afraid I can’t,” the man replied regretfully. “There are a number of others ahead of you. All our salespeople are”

“Perhaps you don’t know who we are!” Ada interrupted rudely.

“Indeed I do,” the floor manager told her wearily. “I will have a saleswoman here in a few moments. If you will only wait”

“We’re not accustomed to waiting,” Isabel Topham told him icily.

“Such service!” Ada chimed in. “Do you realize that my father owns considerable stock in Taylor’s? If we report your conduct to him, he could have you discharged.”

“I’m sorry,” the harassed man apologized. “But it is a rule of the store. You must await your turn.”

Ada tossed her head and her eyes flashed angrily. This did nothing to improve her looks. In spite of the expensive clothes she wore, Ada was not attractive. She was very thin and sallow, with an expression of petulance. Now that her face was distorted with anger, she was almost ugly.

Isabel, the pride of the Topham family, was rather pretty, but her face lacked character. She had acquired an artificially elegant manner of speaking which, although irritating, was sometimes amusing. It was her mother’s ambition that Isabel marry into a socially prominent family.

“I pity any future husband of hers!” Nancy thought with a chuckle.

Suddenly Ada and Isabel saw Nancy, who nodded a greeting. Isabel coldly returned the nod, but Ada gave no indication that she had even noticed Nancy.

At that moment a saleswoman hurried toward the Topham sisters. At once they began to shower abuse upon the young woman for her failure to wait on them sooner.

“What is it you wish to look at, Miss Topham?” the clerk said, flushing.

“Evening dresses.”

The saleswoman brought out several dresses. Nancy watched curiously as the Tophams, in an unpleasant frame of mind, tossed aside beautiful models with scarcely a second glance. They found fault with every garment.

“This is a very chic gown,” the saleswoman told them hopefully, as she displayed a particularly attractive dress of lace and chiffon. “It arrived only this morning.”

Ada picked it up, gave the dress one careless glance, then tossed it into a chair, as the distracted clerk went off to bring other frocks.

The fluffy gown slipped to the floor in a crumpled mass. To Nancy's horror Ada stepped on it as she turned to examine another dress. In disgust, Nancy went to pick it up.

"Leave that alone!" Ada cried out, her eyes blazing. "Nobody asked for your help."

"Are you buying this?" Nancy asked evenly.

"It's none of your business!"

As Nancy continued to hold the dress, Ada in a rage snatched it from her hands, causing a long tear in the chiffon skirt.

"Oh!" Isabel cried out. "Now you've done it! We'd better get out of here, Ada!"

"And why?" her haughty sister shrilled. "It was Nancy Drew's fault! She's always making trouble."

"It was not my fault," Nancy said.

"Come on, Ada," Isabel urged, "before that clerk gets back."

Reluctantly Ada followed Isabel out of the department As they rushed toward a waiting elevator, Nancy gazed after them. At this moment the saleswoman reappeared with an armful of lovely frocks. She stared in bewilderment at the torn dress.

"Where did my customers go?" she asked Nancy worriedly.

Nancy pointed toward the elevator, but made no comment. Instead she said, "I'm looking for an evening dress myself. This torn one is very pretty. Do you think it could be mended?"

"Oh, I don't know," the woebegone clerk wailed. "I'll probably be held responsible and I can't afford to pay for the dress."

"I'm sure Taylor's wouldn't ask you to do that," Nancy said kindly. "If there's any trouble, I'll speak to the manager myself. What usually happens is that such a dress is greatly reduced."

"Thank you," the clerk replied. "I'll call Miss Reed, the fitter, and see what can be done."

“First, let me try on the dress,” Nancy said, smiling.

They found a vacant fitting room and Nancy took off her suit and blouse. Then she slipped the lovely pale-blue dance creation over her head and the saleswoman zipped it up.

“It’s darling on you,” she said enthusiastically.

Nancy grinned. “I kind of like myself in it,” she said. “Please call the fitter now.”

Presently Miss Reed, a gray-haired woman, appeared. Within seconds she had made a change in an overlap oŁ the chiffon skirt. The tear was no longer visible and the style of the dress was actually improved.

“I told our manager what happened,” said the saleswoman. “If you want the dress, he will reduce the price fifty percent.”

“How wonderful!” Nancy exclaimed. Laughing, she said, “That price will fit into my budget nicely. I’ll take the dress. Please send it.” She gave her name and address. To herself she added, “Ada Topham did me a favor. But if she ever finds out what happened, she’ll certainly be burned up!” Nancy suppressed a giggle.

“It’s been a real pleasure waiting on you, Miss Drew,” the saleswoman said after Miss Reed left and Nancy was putting on her suit. “But how I dread to see those Topham sisters come in here! They’re so unreasonable. And they’ll be even worse when they get Josiah Crowley’s money.”

The woman lowered her voice. “The estate hasn’t been settled, but the girls are counting on the fortune already. Last week I heard Ada say to her sister, ‘Oh, I guess there’s no question about our getting old Crowley’s fortune. But I wish Father would stop worrying that somebody is going to show up with a later will which may do us out of it.’ “

Nancy was too discreet to engage in gossip with the saleswoman. But she was interested and excited about the information. The fact that Mr. Topham was disturbed indicated to her that he too suspected Josiah Crowley had made a second will

The conversation reminded Nancy of her date. She glanced at her wrist watch and saw that it was after twelve o’clock.

“I must hurry or I’ll be late for an appointment with my dad,” she told

the saleswoman.

Nancy drove directly to her father's office. Although she was a few minutes ahead of the appointed time, she found that he was ready to leave.

"What luck, Dad?" Nancy asked eagerly. "Did Mr. Rolsted accept your luncheon invitation?"

"Yes. We are to meet him at the Royal Hotel in ten minutes. Do you still think I should quiz him about the Crowley will?"

"Oh, I'm more interested than ever in the case." She told her father about the saleswoman's gossipy remarks.

"Him," said Mr. Drew. "It's not what you'd call evidence, but the old saying usually holds good, 'Where there's smoke, there's fire.' Come, let's go!"

The Royal Hotel was located less than a block away, and Nancy and her father quickly walked the distance. Mr. Rolsted was waiting in the lobby. Carson Drew introduced his daughter, then the three made their way to the dining room where a table had been reserved for them.

At first the conversation centered about a variety of subjects. As the luncheon progressed the two lawyers talked enthusiastically of their college days together and finally of their profession. Nancy began to fear that the subject of the Crowley estate might never be brought up.

Then, after the dessert course, Mr. Drew skillfully turned the conversation into a new channel and mentioned some strange cases which he had handled.

"By the way," he said, "I haven't heard the details of the Crowley case. How are the Tophams making out? I understand other relatives are trying to break the will."

For a moment Mr. Rolsted remained silent. Was he reluctant to enter into a discussion of the matter? Nancy wondered.

Finally the lawyer said quietly, "The settlement of the estate wasn't given to me, Carson. But I confess I've followed it rather closely because of something that happened a year ago. As the present will stands, I do not believe it can be broken."

“Then the Tophams fall heir to the entire estate,” Mr. Drew commented.

“Yes, unless a more recent will is uncovered.”

“Another will?” Carson Drew inquired innocently. “Then you believe Crowley made a second one?”

Mr. Rolsted hesitated as though uncertain whether or not he should divulge any further information. Then, with a quick glance about, he lowered his voice and said, “Of course this is strictly confidential”

CHAPTER IV

Racing the Storm

"CONFIDENTIAL?" Mr. Drew repeated, looking at Mr. Rolsted. "You may rest assured that whatever you tell us will not be repeated to anyone."

"Well, I'll say this much," Mr. Rolsted went on, "about a year ago Josiah Crowley came to me and said he wanted to draw up a new will. He indicated that he intended to spread out his bequests among several people. He expressed a desire to write the will himself, and asked me a number of questions. I took him to my office and told him exactly how to proceed. When he left, he promised to have me look over the document after he had drawn it up "

"Then you actually saw the will?" Mr. Drew asked in surprise.

"No. Strange to say, Crowley never came back. I don't know whether he ever wrote the will or not."

"And if he did, there would be a chance that it would not be legal?" Nancy spoke up.

"Yes. He might have typed it and signed the paper without a witness. In this state at least two witnesses are required and three are advisable."

"What would happen," Nancy asked, "if a person were ill or dying and had no witness, and wanted to make a will?"

Mr. Rolsted smiled. "That sometimes happens. If the person writes the will himself by hand and signs it, so there's no doubt the same person did both, the surrogate's office will accept it for probate."

"Then if Mr. Crowley wrote out and signed a new will, it would be legal," Nancy commented.

"That's right. But there's another thing to remember. It's pretty risky for someone who is not a lawyer to draw up a will that cannot be broken."

Mr. Drew nodded. "If Josiah Crowley left any loophole in a will he wrote personally, the Tophams would drag the matter into court."

“Yes. It’s a foregone conclusion that the Tophams will fight to keep the fortune whether they have a right to it or not. I believe some other relatives have filed a claim, but up to the moment they have no proof that a later will exists.”

Although Nancy gave no indication of her feelings, the possibility that Mr. Crowley had made a new will thrilled her. As soon as Mr. Drew paid the luncheon check, the three arose and left the dining room. Mr. Rolsted took leave oŁ Nancy and her father in the lobby.

“Well, Nancy, did you find out what you wanted to know?” Mr. Drew asked after the lawyer had left.

“Oh, Dad, it’s just as I suspected. I’m sure Mr. Crowley did make a later will He hid it some place If only I could find out where!”

“It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack,” Mr. Drew commented.

“I must figure out a way!” Nancy said with determination. “I want to help little Judy.”

She awoke the next morning thinking about the mystery. But where should she start hunting for possible clues to a second will? She continued pondering about it while she showered and dressed.

As she entered the dining room, she was greeted with a cheery “Good morning” from her father and Hannah Gruen. During breakfast Mr. Drew said, “Nancy, would you do a little errand for me this morning?”

“Why, of course, Dad.”

“I have a number of legal documents which must be delivered to Judge Hart at Masonville some time before noon. I’d take them myself, but I have several important appointments. I’d appreciate it if you would drive over there with them.”

“I’ll be glad to go,” Nancy promised willingly. “Besides, it’s such a wonderful day. I’ll enjoy the trip. Where are the papers?”

“At the office. You can drive me down and I’ll get them for you.”

Nancy, wearing a yellow sunback dress and jacket, hurried away to get her gloves and handbag. Before Mr. Drew had collected his own belongings, she had brought her car from the garage and was waiting for him at the front door.

“I put the top down so I can enjoy the sun,” she explained as her father climbed in.

“Good idea. I haven’t heard you mention the Crowley case yet today,” Mr. Drew teased as they rode along. “Have you forgotten about it?”

Nancy’s face clouded. “No, I haven’t forgotten, but I must admit I am stumped as to where to search for clues.”

“Maybe I can help you. I’ve learned that the two girls on River Road who expected to be remembered in the will are named Hoover. You might look them up on your return trip.”

“That’s great. I’ll watch the mailboxes for their name.”

When they reached the building where Mr. Drew had his office, Nancy parked the car and waited while her father went upstairs to get the legal documents to be delivered to Judge Hart Returning a few minutes later, he placed a fat Manila envelope in his daughter’s hand.

“Give this to the judge. You know where to find him?”

“Yes, Dad. In the old Merchants Trust Company Building.”

“That’s right.”

Selecting a recently constructed highway, Nancy rode along, glancing occasionally at the neatly planted fields on cither side. Beyond were rolling hills.

“Pretty,” she commented to herself. “Oh, why can’t all people be nice like this scenery and not make trouble?”

It was nearly eleven o’clock when she finally drove into Masonville. Nancy went at once to Judge Hart’s office but was informed he had gone to the courthouse. Recalling that her father had mentioned the necessity of the papers being delivered before noon, she set off in search of the judge.

Nancy had considerable trouble trying to see him, and it was twelve o’clock when at last she delivered the Manila envelope into his hands.

“Thank you very much,” he said. “I’ll need these directly after lunch.”

Nancy smiled. “Then I’m glad I found you.”

When Judge Hart learned that Nancy was the daughter of Carson

Drew, he at once insisted that she have luncheon with him and his wife at their home before returning to River Heights.

She accepted the invitation and spent a very pleasant hour with the Harts. During the meal the judge laughingly asked if Nancy was still playing aide to her father.

"Oh, yes," she said, and at once told him about the Drews' interest in the Crowley case.

"Did you know Josiah Crowley or ever hear of him?" she asked.

Both the Harts nodded. "A maid who used to be with them, came to work for us after Mrs. Crowley's death," the judge explained. "Jane herself passed away a short time ago."

"We never met Josiah," Mrs. Hart added, "but Jane pointed him out to my husband and me one time down on Main Street."

"Did he have relatives or friends in town?" Nancy inquired.

"I think not," the judge replied.

Nancy wondered what old Josiah had been doing in Masonville if he had no relatives or friends there. The town was not known as a spot for sight-seeing. Her interest was further quickened when Mrs. Hart remarked that she had seen Mr. Crowley in town at another time also.

"How long ago was that?" the girl asked.

Mrs. Hart thought a minute, then replied, "Oh, less than a year, I'd say."

When luncheon was over, the judge said he must leave. Nancy told the Harts she too should go. She thanked them for their hospitality, then said good-by. Soon she was driving homeward.

"Why had Mr. Crowley gone to Masonville?" she asked herself. "Could it have had anything to do with a later will?"

Nancy had chosen a route which would take her to River Road. Half an hour later she turned into the beautiful country road which wound in and out along the Muskoka River, and began to look at the names on the mailboxes. "Hoover," she reminded herself.

About halfway to River Heights, while enjoying the pastoral scenes of cows standing knee-high in shallow sections of the stream, and sheep

grazing on flower-dotted hillsides, Nancy suddenly realized the sun had been blotted out.

“A thunderstorm’s on the way,” she told herself, glancing at black clouds scudding across the sky. “Guess I’d better put the top of the car up.”

She pressed the button on the dashboard to raise the top, but nothing happened. Puzzled, Nancy tried again. Still there was no response. By this time large drops of rain had started to fall.

“I’ll get soaked,” Nancy thought, as she looked around.

There was no shelter in sight. But ahead, past a steep rise, was a sharp bend in the road. Hopeful that there would be a house or barn beyond, Nancy started the car again.

Vivid forked lightning streaked across the sky. It was followed by an earth-shaking clap of thunder. The rain came down harder.

“Oh, why didn’t I bring a raincoat?” Nancy wailed.

When Nancy swung around the bend, she was delighted to see a barn with lightning rods about a quarter mile ahead. Farther on stood a small white house.

“I wonder if that’s the Hoover place,” Nancy mused.

By now the storm was letting loose in all its fury. The sky was as dark as night and Nancy had to switch on her headlights to see the road. She was already thoroughly drenched and her thought of shelter at this point was one of safety rather than of keeping dry.

Nancy turned on the windshield wipers, but the rain was so blinding in its intensity, it was impossible to see more than a few feet ahead. Almost in an instant the road had dissolved into a sea of mud.

Nancy had been caught in a number of storms, but never one as violent as this. She feared a bad skid might land her in a ditch before she could reach the shelter of the barn.

“How much farther is it?” she worried. “It didn’t seem this far away.”

The next instant, to Nancy’s right, a ball of fire rocketed down from the sky.

“Oh! That was close!” she thought fearfully. Her skin tingled from the

electrical vibrations in the air.

A moment later a surge of relief swept over Nancy. “At last!” she breathed.

At the side of the road the barn loomed up. Its large double doors were wide open. Without hesitation, Nancy headed straight for the building and drove in.

The next moment she heard a piercing scream!

CHAPTER V

A Surprising Story

NANCY froze behind the wheel. Had she inadvertently hit someone? Her heart pounding in fright, she opened the car door to step out.

At the same instant a shadowy figure arose from a pile of hay near her. “I guess I must have scared you silly when I screamed,” said a girl of Nancy’s age, stepping forward.

“You You’re all right?” Nancy gasped.

“Yes. And I’m sorry I yelled. I came out here to check on our supply of feed for the chickens. I didn’t think it was going to be a bad storm, so I didn’t bother to go back to the house.”

“It’s pretty bad,” said Nancy.

“Well, the storm terrified me,” the girl continued. “I didn’t hear your car coming, and when it rushed in here, I panicked.”

Nancy began to breathe normally again, then told the stranger her name and the fact that the mechanism for raising the top of the convertible was not working.

“That’s a shame,” said the girl. “And you must get your clothes dried. The storm is letting up. Let’s dash over to the house. Grace will help you too. She’s my sister. My name’s Allison Hoover.”

Hoover! Nancy was tempted to tell Allison that she had been planning to call, but she decided not to mention it at the moment. It might be better to do her sleuthing more subtly.

Nancy smiled at Allison. “Thanks a million. But first I’d like to wipe out the car. Are there any rags around the barn?”

Allison produced several and together the two girls mopped the water from the cushions and floor. By this time the rain had stopped. As Nancy and Allison sloshed through a series of puddles to the farmhouse, Nancy had a better chance to study her companion. She was tall, with reddish-blond hair and very fair skin. Her voice was musical and she had an attractive, lilting laugh.

The girls reached the run-down farmhouse and stamped the mud from their shoes on the back porch. Then Allison flung open the door, and they entered a cheerful kitchen.

As the door shut behind them, another girl who was just closing the oven of an old-fashioned range turned toward them in surprise.

“Grace, I’ve brought a visitor,” Allison said quickly. “Nancy, I want you to meet my sister. She’s the mainstay of our family of two.”

Grace Hoover cordially acknowledged the introduction and greeted Nancy with a warm smile. Nancy judged her to be at least four years older than Allison. Her face was rather serious, and it was evident from her manner that responsibility had fallen on her shoulders at an early age.

Nancy was attracted to both girls and responded to their friendly welcome. She put on a robe which Allison brought her and Grace hung her wet clothes near the range. Presently Grace pulled an ironing board from a closet with the intention of pressing Nancy’s garments. But Nancy would not hear of this and began to iron them herself.

“This is fun,” she said to the sisters. “I don’t know what I would have done without you girls.”

“It’s great for us,” Allison spoke up. “We don’t have much company. To tell you the truth, we can’t afford it.”

Grace stepped to the stove, removed a golden-brown cake from the oven, and set it on the table to cool.

“But today we’re not talking about money. It’s Allison’s birthday and this is a birthday cake. Nancy, if you’re not in too much of a hurry, I wish you’d join us in a little celebration.”

“Why, I’d love to,” Nancy said.

“Grace’s cakes are yummy,” Allison declared. “I’m not much of a cook myself. My department is taking care of the barn and the chickens.”

Soon Nancy finished pressing her clothes and put them back on. Meanwhile, the cake had cooled and Grace started to spread the chocolate frosting.

“Suppose you two go into the living room and wait,” she suggested. “I’ll bring in the cake and tea.”

Nancy followed Allison to the adjoining room. Although it was comfortable, the room did not contain much furniture. The floor had been painted and was scantily covered with handmade rag rugs. With the exception of an old-fashioned sofa, an inexpensive table, a few straight-backed chairs and an old oil stove which furnished heat in cold weather, there was little else in the room. However, dainty white curtains covered the windows, and Nancy realized that although the Hoovers were poor, they had tried hard to make their home attractive.

“Do you two girls live here alone all the time?” Nancy inquired.

Allison nodded. “Grace and I have been living here since Father died. That was two years ago. Mother passed away just before that,” the girl added with a slight catch in her voice. “Their illnesses took every penny we had.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” Nancy remarked sympathetically. “It must be dreadfully hard for two girls to run the farm by themselves.”

“Our farm isn’t as large as it once was,” Allison said quietly. “We have only a few acres left. I know you are too polite to ask how we manage, Nancy. Grace helps a dressmaker at Masonville whenever she can get work. She makes all her own, clothes and mine too. And I raise chickens.”

From just beyond the doorway suddenly came the strains of “Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birth”

By this time Nancy had joined in. She and Grace finished “day to you. Happy Birthday, dear Allison. Happy Birthday to you!”

Grace set the cake with eighteen lighted candles on the table. She and Nancy sang the second verse with the words “May you have many more!”

Tears stood in Allison’s eyes. When the song ended, she grasped her sister in a tremendous hug. Then she gave Nancy one.

“Thisthis is the nicest birthday I’ve had in years,” she quavered.

“And it’s one of the most enjoyable I’ve ever attended,” Nancy said sincerely.

Suddenly Allison began to sing a tuneful old English ballad about the birthday of a village lass. Nancy listened entranced to Allison’s clear, bell-like tones. When she finished, Nancy applauded, then said:

“That was perfectly lovely. You have a beautiful voice, Allison!”

The singer laughed gaily. “Thank you, Nancy. I’ve always wanted to take lessons, but as you know, voice training is pretty expensive.”

At that moment Grace brought in a tray of fragrant tea. As she poured three cups, Allison blew out the candles and served the cake.

“I’ve never tasted anything more delicious in all my life,” Nancy said enthusiastically.

The three girls chatted like old friends. Finally the sun broke through the clouds. As Nancy rose to leave, she noticed an unusual picture on the wall opposite her and commented on its beauty.

“Uncle Josiah Crowley gave it to us,” Allison told her. “If he were only alive now, things would be different.”

At the mention of the name, Nancy sat down again. Was she going to pick up a clue to the possibility that Mr. Crowley had made a later will?

“He wasn’t really our uncle,” Grace explained. “But we loved him as much as though he were a relative.” Her voice broke and for a moment she could not go on. Then, gaining control of herself, she continued, “He lived on the farm next to usthat was when Mother and Father were alive. All of Allison’s and my misfortunes seemed to come at once.”

“He was the dearest man you ever saw,” Allison added. “Some people thought him queer, but you never minded his peculiar ways after you knew him. Uncle Josiah was very good to us. He always told me that he’d back me in a singing career.”

“Yes,” Grace added. “Uncle Josiah used to say Allison sang as sweetly as a bird and he wanted to pay for lessons with a famous teacher. But after he went to live with the Tophams, he never said any more about it.”

“He never liked it with the Tophams, though,” Allison declared. “They weren’t kind to him, and he used to slip away to visit us.”

“Uncle Josiah often said that we seemed like his own children,” Grace spoke up. “He brought us many nice gifts, but we loved him for himself and not his money. I remember, though, the very last day we saw him alive, he told us ‘I have planned a big surprise to make you

girls happy. But I can't tell you now what it is. You'll see it in my will.' Those were his very words."

"And then the Tophams got everything," Allison said. "He must have changed his mind for some reason."

"It's hard to believe he would forget his promise to us," Grace said sadly.

"Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful if a later will could be found!" Allison exclaimed.

"Yes," Nancy replied slowly. "I've heard that Mr. Crowley told other people he was leaving money to them. The Turner sisters, for instance. Do you know them?"

"Slightly," Grace answered.

"My dad," Nancy went on, "is a lawyer and he and I are very much interested in this case. He even mentioned you girls, and to tell the truth I was on my way here to talk to you."

Allison impulsively grasped Nancy's arm. "You say your father is a lawyer? Grace and I are positive Uncle Josiah made a later will. Oh, if we could only engage your father to help us prove this!" Then a sad look came over her face. "But I'm forgettingwe wouldn't have any money to pay him if we should lose the case."

"Don't let that worry you," said Nancy kindly. "This is your birthday and you must be happy, Allison. My special wish for you is that before you're one year older, you'll inherit some of the Crowley money, so that you can take those singing lessons!"

CHAPTER VI

An Exciting Appointment

THE HOOVER girls walked out to the barn with Nancy. “Do come to see us again,” Grace called, as the young detective climbed into her car.

“Yes, please do,” Allison added.

Nancy promised that she would. “As soon as I have some news,” she said.

Although the weather had cleared, the River Road remained muddy and slippery. Nancy found it necessary to drive with extreme care for the next two miles until she reached the main highway.

“No wonder this River Road isn’t used much,” she thought. “And how do Grace and Allison get to town?” Nancy wondered. She had not seen a car at the Hoover home and knew that no bus passed their door.

“I certainly wish,” she thought, “that I or somebody else could locate a later will of Josiah Crowley’s by which the Hoovers and the Turners would receive some much-needed money. I must tell Dad about this latest development.”

She decided to see if her father was in his office and drove directly there. Nancy parked the car in a nearby lot. She surveyed the convertible ruefully as she climbed out.

“Poor thing! It certainly needs a bath!”

Nancy found Mr. Drew in. As she entered his private office, he arose from the desk chair to kiss her. “I’m glad you’re hereand safe,” the lawyer said. “I was worried about you when that violent storm came up. When Hannah phoned me that you weren’t back, I began to regret I’d sent you on the errand.”

His daughter grinned. “I’m back, all in one piece. I delivered the papers to Judge Hart and learned that he and his wife saw Mr. Crowley in Masonville a couple of times. Also, I talked to the Hoover girls.”

She described her meeting with Allison and Grace Hoover and ended

by asking her father if he could help them.

“From what you say, it does look as though Josiah Crowley might have made another will which included them as beneficiaries,” Mr. Drew commented thoughtfully. “I’ll be glad to do anything I can to help the Hoover girls.”

He asked whether the sisters had given Nancy any specific information about Mr. Crowley’s habits or other helpful clues. When Nancy shook her head, Mr. Drew suggested that she invite the girls to his office for a little conference. “Perhaps if I ask them some questions, it will recall helpful incidents.” The lawyer studied his desk calendar for a moment, then looked up at his daughter. “How about tomorrow afternoon at two-forty-five? I can give them about half an hour.”

For answer, Nancy gave her father a hug and then asked if she might use his telephone to call the Hoovers at once.

Grace and Allison eagerly accepted the Drews’ invitation, and Nancy said she would drive out to bring them to the conference and take them home afterward.

“You’re a doll!” cried Allison, who had answered the telephone. “Nancy, I just know you’re going to solve this mystery!”

Suddenly an idea came to Nancy. She asked Allison how long the girls would be able to stay in River Heights.

“Oh, as long as you need us,” Allison replied.

“Good. Then I’d like you both to stay and have supper with us,” Nancy said.

“Sorry I can’t join you,” Mr. Drew told his daughter as she hung up. “I have a dinner engagement and conference in the evening.”

Just then, the mayor of River Heights was shown into the lawyer’s office, and Nancy arose to leave. She spoke to the mayor for a moment, then said, “See you later, Dad.”

Before Nancy returned home, she stopped at an old-fashioned house on a side street. It was the home of Signer Mascagni, a famous voice teacher who had retired to the small city the year before, but took a few outstanding pupils. Nancy introduced herself to the white bushy-haired, florid-faced man, then said:

“Signor Mascagni, would you be willing to listen to the voice of a friend of mine and give your honest opinion as to whether or not she might become a great singer? If she might, and she can obtain the money for lessons, would you be able to take her as a pupil?”

Signor Mascagni studied Nancy for several minutes before replying. Finally he said, “You do not look like the kind of girl who would come here on a foolish errand. Ordinarily I do not accept beginners. But in this case I would be willing to hear your friend sing.” He laughed. “Mind you, I will give you nothing but the truth, and if your friend does not measure up, I hope her feelings will not be hurt too deeply.”

Nancy laughed too. “I like honesty,” she said. “As a matter of fact, this girl knows nothing about what I am asking you. Coming here will be a complete surprise to her. I’m probably no judge of voices, but I think she’s a natural. However, we will both appreciate having your opinion, and will certainly abide by it.”

She arranged for a meeting the following afternoon at four o’clock and left Signer Mascagni’s house in an excited mood. “Maybe I’m going way out on a limb,” Nancy mused, “but this is another one of those hunches of mine that Dad talks about, and I must carry through.”

When she picked up the Hoovers the following day, Nancy did not mention the appointment with the voice teacher. The three girls went directly to Mr. Drew’s office and at once he began to quiz Grace and Allison about Mr. Crowley.

“I understand that he was a rather eccentric man,” the lawyer began. “Suppose you tell me everything you can remember about what Josiah Crowley did and what he said which would help us figure out where he might have secreted a later will.”

“Uncle Josiah was rather absent-minded,” Grace spoke up. “I often saw him hunting for his spectacles, which he had pushed up on his head.”

“Did he ever hide things?” Mr. Drew asked.

“Oh, yes.” Allison laughed. “Uncle Josiah was always putting articles away in what he called a safe place. But the places were so safe he never could find the things again!”

“Then,” Nancy spoke up excitedly, “Mr. Crowley could have hidden a will and then forgotten where?”

“I suppose so,” Grace replied. “While living with the Tophams, I’m sure that’s just what he would have done. One day when he was calling at our house he talked about the Tophams and the way they were trying to get all his money. ‘I guess they thinkjust because I stay onthat they’re going to get everything. But they’ll be fooled when they find I’ve made another will,’ he said with that odd little chuckle of his. ‘This time I’m not going to trust it to any lawyer. I’ll put it away in a place that I know will be safe.’ “

Allison asked Mr. Drew, “Do you think Uncle Josiah hid another will somewhere in the Tophams’ house?”

The lawyer looked down at his desk for several seconds before replying. “If he did, we would have a great fight on our hands, I’m afraid, trying to persuade the Tophams to let us make a search.”

Another thought had come to Nancy and she shuddered at the idea. Perhaps the Tophams had been alerted by all the talk of a later will, had searched for it, discovered one, and by now destroyed it I

She flashed her father a questioning look and got the impression that he had the same thought. But there was no point in discouraging the Hoover girls by telling them this.

Mr. Drew continued to question the sisters until three-thirty, then said he had another appointment. He would do all he could to help the girls and would not charge them for his services.

“Unless they bring results,” he added with a smile.

“You’re very kind, just like your daughter,” said Grace as she arose and shook hands with the lawyer. “You have no idea how much Allison and I appreciate what you’re doing for us.”

When the three girls reached Nancy’s car, she told the sisters she wanted them to meet someone special in town, and drove directly to Signer Mascagni’s home. As they went up to the front porch they could hear the sounds of a soprano voice singing an aria from Tosca.

“How beautiful!” Allison exclaimed softly.

The girls were admitted by a maid and asked to wait in a small room while Signor Mascagni’s pupil finished her lesson. Puzzled, Allison waited for Nancy to explain.

“I have a surprise for you,” Nancy said with a grin. “Signor Mascagni

has promised to listen to your voice. If you pass the test, he'll consider taking you as a pupilthat is, after we find the money for voice lessons."

Allison was too dumfounded to speak, but Grace cried out, "Oh, Nancy, what are you going to do next? We've known you only twenty-four hours and you've already boosted our morale sky-high."

At this moment the door to the studio opened. The young soprano came out, followed by Signor Mascagni. He said good-by to his pupil, then invited the three callers into the studio. Nancy quickly introduced the Hoover sisters.

"And you are the singer," the man said almost at once, addressing Allison. "I can tell from your speaking voice."

Apparently the teacher sensed that Allison had been taken by surprise and was a little nervous. Accordingly he began to talk on other subjects than music. He showed the girls several paintings in the room and pieces of statuary which had come from Italy.

"I prize them highly," he said.

"They are exquisite," Allison remarked.

Signor Mascagni walked to a rear window and pointed out a lovely garden in back of the house. Then, evidently satisfied that Allison was at ease, he led the way to the grand piano and sat down.

"Now what would you like to sing?" he asked Allison with a smile. "Please stand right here facing me."

"Something very simple," she replied. "'America the Beautiful?"

The teacher nodded, asked her what key she would like it played in, then began to accompany her. Allison sang as though inspired. Her voice sounded even more beautiful than it had at the farmhouse, Nancy thought. When Allison finished the song, Signor Mascagni made no comment Instead he asked her to try a scale, then to sing single tones, jumping from octave to octave.

"You have a very fine range, Miss Hoover," was his only comment

For half an hour he had Allison try short songs in various keys and at one point joined with her in a duet. At last he turned around on the piano bench and faced Nancy and Grace.

“I believe,” he said slowly, “I believe that some day we shall know Allison Hoover as an operatic star!”

Before the girls could say anything, he jumped up and turned to shake Allison’s hand fervently. By this time the full import of his words had dawned on the young singer. Tears began to roll down her cheeks.

“Bravissimo! Bravissimo!” he exclaimed. “You sing, you cry, you smile! Magnifico! You will also be a dramatic actress splendida.”

Nancy and Grace were nearly on the verge of tears also, they were so overwhelmed by the happy news. Then suddenly the three girls became serious, remembering that there was still the problem of money for lessons from this great man. They knew his fee per hour must be very high.

Allison suddenly began to talk and poured out her whole story to the white-haired teacher. “But I know,” she declared with a brave smile, “that somehow I’m going to get the money for the lessons and I wouldn’t want to take them from anybody but you, Signer Mascagni. I’ll come back to you just as soon as I can. Thank you very, very much. Please, girls, I’d like to leave now.”

As Allison rushed toward the front door, Signor Mascagni detained Nancy and Grace. “This Allison, she is wonderful!” he exclaimed. “I want to give her lessons to see that her training is correct.” He threw up his hands and shook his head. “But I cannot afford to give the lessons free. Perhaps I could cut my price”

“We’ll find the money somehow, signer!” Nancy promised. Then she and Grace thanked the teacher and followed Allison outside.

At the Drew home that evening there were mixed emotions on everyone’s part. Hannah Gruen had taken a great fancy to the Hoover sisters and the news of Allison’s talent had thrilled her, as well as the girls. Conversation at supper was gay and animated. Nancy and Mrs. Gruen drove the sisters to their farm and on parting Nancy again promised to do all she could to help find a will from which the girls might possibly benefit.

But figuring out how to do this became a problem that seemed insurmountable to Nancy. At breakfast the following day, Mr. Drew suggested, “Nancy, perhaps if you’d give your mind a little rest from the Crowley matter, an inspiration about the case might come to you.”

His daughter smiled. “Good idea, Dad. I think I’ll take a walk in the

fresh air and clear the cobwebs from my brain."

As soon as she finished eating, Nancy set out at a brisk pace. She headed for River Heights' attractive park to view the display of roses which was always very beautiful. She had gone only a short distance along one of the paths when she caught sight of Isabel and Ada Topham seated on a bench not far ahead.

"They're the last people in the world I want to see right now," Nancy thought. "They'll probably say something mean to me and I'll lose my temper. When I think how Grace and Allison and the Turners could use just one-tenth of the Crowley money which the Tophams are going to inherit, I could just burst!"

Nancy had paused, wondering whether she should turn back. "No," she told herself, "I'll go on to see the roses. I'll take that path back of the Tophams and they won't notice me."

Nancy made her way along quietly, with no intention of eavesdropping on the two girls. But suddenly two words of their conversation came to her ears, bringing Nancy to an involuntary halt.

She had distinctly heard Isabel say"the will."

In a flash Nancy's detective instincts were aroused and her heart pounded excitedly. "It must be Josiah Crowley's will they're talking about," she reasoned.

CHAPTER VII

The Angry Dog

WITH the instinct of a detective who dared not miss a clue, Nancy deliberately moved closer to the bench on which the Topham girls were seated.

“If there should be another will, I’m afraid we’d be out of luck.” The words, in Ados nasal voice, came clearly to Nancy.

Isabel’s reply was in so low a tone that the young sleuth could just manage to catch the words, “Well, I, for one, don’t believe Josiah Crowley ever made a later will.” She gave a low laugh. “Mother watched him like a hawk.”

“Or thought she did,” Isabel retorted. “The old man got out of her clutches several times, don’t forget.”

“Yes, and what’s worse, I’m sure Nancy Drew thinks he made a later will. That’s why she’s taking such an interest in those Hoover girls. I actually saw them go into Mr. Drew’s office yesterday and it wasn’t to deliver eggs! If Nancy gets her father interested, he might dig up another will. Oh, how I hate that interfering girl!”

At this Nancy could barely refrain from laughing. So the Tophams were concerned about the existence of a second will. With bated breath she listened further.

“You’re such a worry wart, Ada. You can trust Dad and Mother to take care of things, no matter what happens,” Isabel commented dryly. “They won’t let that pile of money get away from us. It’s ours by right, anyhow.”

“You’ve got something there,” Ada conceded. “We should have old Josiah’s money after supporting and putting up with him for three years. That was pretty clever of Mother, never accepting any board money from Josiah Crowley!”

The conversation ended as Isabel and Ada arose from the bench and walked away. Nancy waited until they were out of sight, then emerged from her hiding place. Seating herself on the bench vacated by the Topham sisters, Nancy mulled over the remarks she had just overheard.

“There’s no doubt in my mind now that if there is a later will, the Tophams haven’t destroyed it. How thrilling! But where can it be?”

Nancy realized that to find it was a real challenge. “And I’d better hurry up before the Tophams stumble on it!”

For another ten minutes Nancy sat lost in thought, sifting all the facts she had gleaned so far.

“There must be some clue I’ve overlooked,” she told herself. Suddenly, with a cry of delight, she sprang to her feet. “Why didn’t I think of that before? The Hoover girls and the Turners aren’t the only ones who should have figured in this will. There are other relatives of Mr. Crowley who have filed a claim. I wonder who they are. If I could only talk with them, I might pick up a due!”

Immediately Nancy set off for her father’s office. He was engaged in an important conference when she arrived, and she had to wait ten minutes before being admitted to the inner office.

“Now what?” Mr. Drew asked, smiling, as she burst in upon him. “Have you solved the mystery or is your purse in need of a little change?”

Nancy’s cheeks were flushed and her eyes danced with excitement. “Don’t tease me,” she protested. “I need some information!”

“At your service, Nancy.”

The young sleuth poured out the story of the Topham sisters’ conversation in the park, and told him of her own conclusions. Mr. Drew listened with interest until she had finished.

“Excellent deducting,” he praised his daughter. “I’m afraid, though, I can’t help you obtain the relatives’ names. I don’t know any of them.”

Nancy looked disappointed. “Oh dear!” she sighed. “And I’m so anxious to find out right away. If I delay even a single day the Tophams may locate that other willand destroy it.”

The next instant her face brightened. “I know! I’ll drive out and see the Turner sisters. They might be able to tell me who the other relatives are.” Nancy arose and headed for the door.

“Just a minute,” said the lawyer. “I wonder if you realize just what you are getting into, Nancy?”

“What do you mean?”

“Only this. Detective work isn’t always the safest occupation in which to engage. I happen to know that Richard Topham is an unpleasant man when crossed. If you do find out anything which may frustrate him, the entire Topham family could make things extremely difficult for you.”

“I’m not afraid of them, Dad.”

“Good!” Mr. Drew exclaimed. “I was hoping you would say that. I’m glad you have the courage of your convictions, but I didn’t want you to march off into battle without a knowledge of what you might be up against.”

“Battle?”

“Yes. The Tophams won’t give up the fortune without a bitter struggle. However, if they attempt to make serious trouble, I promise to deal with them myself.”

“And if I do find the will?”

“I’ll take the matter into court.”

“Oh. thank you! There’s no one like you in all the world.”

After leaving her father’s office, Nancy went directly home to get her car. When she told Hannah Gruen her plans, the housekeeper warned, “Don’t become too deeply involved in this matter, dear. In your zeal to help other people, you may forget to be on your guard.”

“I promise to be as careful as a pussycat walking up a slippery roof,” Nancy assured the housekeeper with a grin, and left the house.

Quickly backing her car from the garage, she set off in the direction of the Turner home. The miles seemed to melt away as Nancy’s thoughts raced from one idea to another. Before the young sleuth knew it she had reached the house.

“Hi, Judy!” she called to the little girl, who was playing in the yard with a midget badminton set.

The child looked very cunning in a pink play suit. The hand-embroidered Teddy bears on it were surely the work of her loving aunts.

“Hi, Nancy! I’m glad you came. Now I’ll have somebody to play with,” Judy said, running up to the visitor.

Obligingly Nancy took a racket and batted the feathered shuttlecock toward the child. “Hit the birdie,” she called.

Judy missed but picked up the shuttlecock and whammed it nicely across the net. Nancy hit it back and this time the little girl caught the birdie on her racket and sent it over.

The game went on for several minutes, with Judy crying out in delight. “You’re the bestest batter I ever played with, Nancy,” she declared.

After ten minutes of play, Nancy said, “Let’s go into the house now, Judy. I want to talk to your aunties.”

Judy skipped ahead and announced her new playmate’s arrival.

“Hello, Nancy,” the women said as she entered the living room.

“We were watching the game from the window,” said Mary Turner. “This is a real thrill for Judy. Edna and I are very poor at hitting the birdie.”

“It was lots of fun,” Nancy replied. “I’m glad to see you all again.”

She now asked whether the police had located the thieves who had taken the silver heirlooms from the house.

“Not yet,” Mary answered. “And what’s worse, we found that several other pieces had been taken, too.”

“What a shame!” Nancy exclaimed. “But I’m sure the stolen articles will be found.” Then she added, “I came here on a particular mission.”

“Yes?”

“Your story about Mr. Josiah Crowley intrigued me. Then, the other day, I met two girls, Grace and Allison Hoover, who told me of a similar promise from him regarding his will.”

“How amazing!” Edna Turner exclaimed. “I heard Josiah mention the Hoovers and Allison’s beautiful voice.”

“Dad and I have become very much interested in the case and are inclined to agree with you and the Hoovers that Mr. Crowley may

have written another will shortly before his death and hidden it some place."

"Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful if such a will could be found!" Mary exclaimed. "It might mean all the difference in the world to Judy's future."

"What I want to do," Nancy went on, "is talk to as many of Mr. Crowley's relatives as I can find. Some place I may pick up a clue to where a more recent will is hidden. Tell me, do any of his other relatives live around here?"

"Yes. Three that I can think of," Edna answered.

She went on to say that two cousins, who had never married, lived on a farm just outside Titusville. "Their names are Fred and William Mathews."

Suddenly the Turner sisters blushed a deep pink. They glanced at each other, then back at Nancy. Finally Edna said:

"Many years ago Fred proposed to Mary, and William to me, and we came near accepting. But just at that time we had the great tragedy in the family and took Judy's mother to rear, so we decided not to marry."

An embarrassing pause was broken by Judy. "Some day my aunties are going to give me one of my mother's dollies, Nancy. Isn't that nice?"

"It certainly is," Nancy agreed. "And you must be sure to show it to me." Then she asked the sisters, "What relation are the Mathews to Mr. Crowley?"

"First cousins on his mother's side."

"Do you think they would mind my asking them some questions, even though I'm a stranger?"

"Not at all," Mary replied. "They're very fine gentlemen."

"And tell them Mary and I sent you," Edna added.

"How far is Titusville from here?" Nancy inquired.

"Oh, not more than five miles on Route 10A. You could drive there in a few minutes. It's on the way to Masonville. Nancy, won't you stay

and have lunch with us?"

Eager to continue her work, the young sleuth was about to refuse, but Judy put in an invitation also. "Please, oh please, Nancy. And while my aunties are fixing it, you and I can play badminton."

"All right," Nancy agreed. "And thank you very much."

It was nearly two o'clock when she finally was ready to depart.

"Oh, Mary," said Edna suddenly, "we forgot to tell Nancy about Josiah's wife's cousin, Mrs. Abby Rowen. She'd be apt to know more about the will than anyone else."

"That's right! You really should call on her, Nancy. She took care of Josiah one time when he was sick, and he thought the world of her. He often declared he intended to leave her something. She's a widow and has very little."

"Even a few thousand dollars would mean a lot to her," Edna added. "Abby must be over eighty years of age, and growing forgetful. She has no children and there's no one to look after her."

"Where shall I find Mrs. Rowen?" Nancy asked, hoping it was not far away.

"Abby lives on the West Lake Road," Edna responded. "It's a good many miles from here."

"Then I shan't have time to go there today," the young sleuth said. "But I'll surely see her as soon as I can. And now I must be going."

Nancy thanked the Turner sisters and said good-by. But before she could leave, Judy insisted upon showing how she could jump rope and do all kinds of dancing steps with a hoop on the lawn.

"Judy entertains us all the time," Mary remarked. "We believe she's very talented."

Nancy thought so too. As she drove off, she again hoped that money would become available for a very special education for Judy.

After Nancy had gone five miles along the designated route, she began to watch the mailboxes. Soon she noticed one which bore the name Mathews. The farmhouse stood back a distance from the road and had a wide sweep of lawn in front of it Near the house a man was riding a

small tractor, mowing the grass.

Nancy drove down the narrow lane which led into the grounds, and stopped opposite the spot where the man was working. The man's back was toward her, and he apparently had not heard the car above the noise of the tractor, so she waited.

Looking toward the house, Nancy suddenly saw a sight that appalled her. Wedged between two stones of a broken wall was a police dog puppy whining pitifully. Nancy dashed forward and released the little animal. As it continued to whimper, she cuddled the pup in her arms and began to examine its paws.

"Why, you poor thing!" Nancy said, seeing a tear in the flesh of one hind leg. "This must be taken care of right away."

She decided to carry the puppy over to the man on the mower. As Nancy walked across the lane, she suddenly heard an angry growl near her. Looking back, she saw a huge police dog, evidently the pup's mother, bounding toward her.

"It's all right," Nancy called soothingly to the dog. "I'm not going to take your baby away."

She took two more strides, but got no farther. With a fierce snarl the dog leaped on Nancy, knocking her flat!

CHAPTER VIII

A Forgotten Secret

NANCY screamed for help, hoping to attract the farmer's attention. She expected momentarily to be bitten by the angry dog, but to her great relief the animal did not harm her.

The young sleuth's sudden fall had caused the puppy to fly from her arms. With a leap its mother was at the pup's side. She grabbed her baby by the back of its neck and trotted off toward the bam.

"O-o, that was a narrow escape." Nancy took a deep breath as she got to her feet, brushed herself off, and ruefully surveyed a tear in her sweater.

By this time the man on the tractor, having changed direction, saw the fracas and came running. He apologized for the dog's actions, but Nancy said quickly:

"It was my fault. I should have set the pup down. Its mother probably thought I was trying to dognap her baby!"

"Possibly."

Nancy explained why she had picked up the little animal and the farmer said he would look at the cut later.

"I'm glad you weren't hurt," he added. "Thanks for being such a good scout about it. Did you come to see me or my brother?" he asked. "I'm Fred Mathews."

Nancy gave her name, and added that she was acquainted with the Turner sisters and others who had been told they would benefit under Josiah Crowley's will.

"My dadthe lawyer Carson Drewand I are working on the case. We believe there might have been a later will than the one presented by Mr. Topham, and we'd like to find it."

"And you came to see if William and I could give you a clue?" Fred's bright blue eyes sparkled boyishly.

"That's right, Mr. Mathews. Also, did Mr. Crowley ever tell you he was

going to leave you some money?"

"Indeed he did."

At this moment another man came from the house and Fred introduced him as his brother William. Both were tall, spare, and strong-muscled. Though their hair was gray, the men's faces were youthful and unwrinkled.

"Let's sit down under the tree here and discuss this," Fred suggested, leading the way to a group of rustic chairs. He told William of Nancy's request, then asked him, "Did Cousin Josiah ever give you any idea he'd made a will in which we were not beneficiaries?"

"No. I thought one would come to light when he died. To tell the truth, Miss Drew, Fred and I were thunderstruck at the will which left everything to the Tophams. That wasn't what Cousin Josiah led us to believe."

"It certainly wasn't," Fred spoke up. "But I guess William and I counted our chickens before they were hatched. We just about make ends meet here with our small fruit farm. Help and equipment cost such a lot. One thing we've always wanted to do, but couldn't afford, was to travel. We thought we'd use the money from Cousin Josiah to do that."

"But our dream bubble burst," said William. "No trips for us."

Nancy smiled. "Don't give up hope yet. Dad and I haven't."

She was disappointed that the brothers could offer her no clues about a place to look for another will. A little while later she left the farm and returned home.

"No new evidence," she told her father. "Let's hope Mrs. Abby Rowen has some!"

Early the next morning she set off for the elderly woman's home, and reached her destination by asking directions of people living along West Lake Road.

"This must be Abby Rowen's house," Nancy told herself. "It fits the description."

She climbed out of her car and stood before the one-story frame building which was badly in need of paint and repair. The yard

around it was overgrown with weeds, and the picket fence enclosing the cottage sagged dejectedly.

“The place looks deserted,” Nancy mused. “But I’ll see if Mrs. Rowen is at home.”

Nancy made her way up the scraggly path to the house and rapped on the front door. There was no response. After a moment, she knocked again.

This tune a muffled voice called, “Who’s there? If you’re a peddler, I don’t want anything.”

“I’m not selling anything,” Nancy called out reassuringly. “Won’t you let me in, please?”

There was a long silence, then the quavering voice replied, “I can’t open the door. I’ve hurt myself and can’t walk.”

Nancy hesitated an instant before pushing open the door. As she stepped into the dreary living room, she saw a frail figure on the couch. Abby Rowen lay huddled under an old shawl, her withered face drawn with pain.

“I am Nancy Drew and I’ve come to help you, Mrs. Rowen.”

The old lady turned her head and regarded Nancy with a stare of wonder.

“You’ve come to help me?” she repeated unbelievingly. “I didn’t think anyone would ever bother about old Abby again.”

“Here, let me arrange the pillows for you.” Gently Nancy moved the old woman into a more comfortable position.

“Yesterday I fell down the cellar stairs,” Mrs. Rowen explained. “I hurt my hip and sprained my ankle.”

“Haven’t you had a doctor?” Nancy asked in astonishment.

“No.” Abby Rowen sighed. “Not a soul has been here and I couldn’t get in touch with anybody. I have no telephone.”

“Can you walk at all?” Nancy asked.

“A little.”

“Then your hip isn’t broken,” Nancy said in relief. “Let me see your ankle. Oh my, it is swollen! I’ll bandage it for you.”

“There’s a clean cloth in the closet in the kitchen,” Abby told her. “I haven’t any regular bandage.”

“You really should have a doctor,” Nancy remarked. “Let me drive you to one.”

“I can’t afford it,” the old woman murmured. “My pension check hasn’t come, and it’s too small, anyway.”

“Let me pay the doctor,” Nancy offered.

Abby Rowen shook her head stubbornly. “I’ll not take charity. I’d rather die first.”

“Well, if you insist upon not having a doctor, I’m going to the nearest drugstore and get some bandaging and a few other things,” Nancy told her. “But before I go, I’ll make you a cup of tea.”

“There’s no tea in the house.”

“Then I’ll get a box. What else do you need?”

“I need ‘most everything, but I can’t afford anything right now. You might get me some tea and a loaf of bread. That’s enough. You’ll find the money in a jar in the cupboard. It’s not very much, but it’s all I have.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” Nancy promised.

She stopped in the kitchen long enough to examine the cupboards. With the exception of a little flour and sugar and a can of soup, there appeared to be nothing in the house to eat. Nancy found that the money jar contained less than five dollars.

“I’ll not take any of it,” she decided.

Quietly the young sleuth slipped out the back door. She drove quickly to the nearest store and ordered a stock of groceries. Then she stopped at a drugstore and purchased bandages and liniment.

Reaching the cottage, she carried the supplies inside and adeptly set about making Abby Rowen more comfortable. She bathed the swollen ankle and bound it neatly with the antiseptic bandage.

“It feels better already,” Mrs. Rowen told her gratefully. “I don’t know what would have happened to me if you hadn’t come.”

“Oh, someone would have dropped in,” said Nancy cheerfully. She went to the kitchen and in a short while prepared tea and a light lunch for the elderly woman.

As Abby Rowen ate the nourishing meal, Nancy was gratified to observe that almost immediately her patient became more cheerful and seemed to gain strength. She sat up on the couch and appeared eager to talk with Nancy.

“There aren’t many folks willing to come in and help an old lady. If Josiah Crowley had lived, things would have been different,” she declared. “I could have paid someone to look after me.”

“It’s strange that he didn’t provide for you in his will,” Nancy replied quietly.

She did not wish to excite the woman by telling her real mission. Yet Nancy hoped that she might lead her tactfully into a discussion of Josiah Crowley’s affairs without raising hopes which might never be realized.

“It’s my opinion that Josiah did provide for me,” Mrs. Rowen returned emphatically. “Many a time he said to me, ‘Abby, you’ll never need to worry. When I’m gone you’ll be well taken care of by my will.’ “

“And then everything was left to the Tophams,” Nancy encouraged her to proceed.

“That was according to the first will,” Abby Rowen stated.

“You mean there was another will?” Nancy inquired eagerly.

“Of course. Why, I saw that will with my own eyes!”

“You saw it!” Nancy gasped.

The old woman nodded gravely. “Mind, I didn’t see what was in the will. One day Josiah came to call and give me some money. Right off I noticed he had a bunch of papers in his hand. ‘Abby,’ he said, ‘I’ve made a new will. I didn’t bother with a lawyer. I wrote it myself.’ “

“How long ago was that?” Nancy asked quickly.

“Let me see.” Abby Rowen frowned thoughtfully. “I can’t remember

the exact date. It was this past spring. Anyway, Josiah hinted that he'd done well by me. 'But, Josiah,' I said, 'are you sure it's legal to write it yourself?' 'Of course it is,' he said. 'A lawyer told me it was all right, just so long as I wrote it myself and signed it. But I did have it witnessed.' "

"Do you know who witnessed the will?" Nancy broke in.

"No. He didn't say."

"Haven't you any idea what became of the will?" Nancy asked hopefully.

"Well, I remember Josiah did say something about putting it where nobody could get it unless they had legal authority. But I really don't know what became of it."

"Are you certain that was all Mr. Crowley said?" Nancy inquired gently. She recalled the Turners saying that Abby had become forgetful.

The elderly woman shook her head and sighed. "Many a night I've lain awake trying to think what else he did say about where he would put the will. I just can't recollect."

"Try to think!" Nancy begged.

"I can't remember," Abby Rowen murmured hopelessly. "I've tried and tried." She leaned against the cushions and closed her eyes, as though the effort had exhausted her.

At that very moment the clock on the mantel chimed twelve. Abby's eyes fluttered open and an odd expression passed over her face.

For an instant she stared straight before her, then slowly turned her head and fastened her eyes on the clock.

CHAPTER IX

Helpful Disclosures

NANCY watched Abby Rowen intently as the mantel clock finished striking. The elderly woman's lips had begun to move.

"The clock!" she whispered. "That was it! The clock!"

Nancy gripped the arms of her chair in excitement. "Josiah Crowley hid the will in a clock?" she prompted.

"Nono, it wasn't that," Abby murmured, sighing again. "I know Josiah said something about a clock, but whatever it was has slipped my mind."

Silence descended over the room. Nancy was wondering what connection the timepiece could have with the missing will. Mrs. Rowen was staring at the clock, evidently still trying to probe her memory.

Suddenly she gave a low cry. "There! It came to me just like that!"

"What, Mrs. Rowen?" Nancy urged quietly, lest she startle the old woman into forgetfulness.

"A notebook!" Abby exclaimed triumphantly.

Nancy's heart gave a leap, but she forced herself to say calmly, "Please tell me more about this notebook."

"Well, one day not long before he passed away, Josiah said to me, 'Abby, after I'm dead, if my last will isn't found, you can learn about it in this little book of mine.' "

"Do you know what became of the notebook, Mrs. Rowen?"

"Oh dearie me! There goes my memory again. No, I don't."

Although baffled, Nancy felt a growing conviction that the whereabouts of the Crowley will was definitely tied up with a clock of some kind. But, she pondered, why did the striking of the mantel clock remind Abby Rowen of the notebook?

Impulsively Nancy got up and went over to the mantel. She looked

inside the glass front and in the back. There were no papers inside.

Returning to her chair, Nancy asked the elderly woman, “What became of the furnishings of the Crowley home when he gave it up?”

“The Tophams got ‘most everything.”

“There must have been a family clock,” Nancy mused, half to herself.

“A family clock?” Abby repeated. “Oh, yes, there was a clock.”

“Can you describe it?”

“It was just an ordinary mantel type, something like minetall, with a square face,” the woman told Nancy. “Only Josiah’s was fancier. Had some kind of a moon on top.”

“What became of the clock?” Nancy questioned.

“I suppose the Tophams got it, too.”

At last Nancy, sure she had done all she could for Abby, and that she had learned as much as possible for the present, rose to depart. After saying good-by, she stopped at a neighboring house and asked the occupants to look in occasionally on the ailing woman.

“I think maybe one of the county’s visiting nurses should see Mrs. Rowen,” she suggested.

“I’ll phone the agency,” the neighbor offered. “Meanwhile, I’ll go over myself. I’m so sorry I didn’t know about Mrs. Rowen.”

As Nancy drove toward River Heights, she jubilantly reviewed the new facts in the case. “Now, if I can only locate Mr. Crowley’s notebookor clockor both!”

Nancy’s brow knit in concentration. How would she go about tracking down the old timepiece?

“I guess,” she concluded, “if the Tophams do have the clock, I’ll have to pay them a visit!”

While she did not relish the idea of calling on the unpleasant family, Nancy was determined to pursue every possible clue. “I can just see Ada’s and Isabel’s expressions when I appear at their front door,” Nancy thought wryly. “Well, I’ll think of some excuse to see them.”

She was still mulling over the problem when she pulled into the driveway of her home and heard a familiar voice calling her name.

“Why, Helen Corning!” exclaimed Nancy, as a slim, attractive school friend of hers ran up. “I haven’t seen you for days.”

“I’ve been busy lately,” Helen explained, “trying to sell six tickets for a charity ball. But I haven’t had much luck. Would you like a couple?”

A sudden idea flashed into Nancy’s mind at her friend’s words. “Helen,” she said excitedly, “I’ll buy two of your tickets and sell the rest for you.”

The other girl stared in astonishment. “Why, that’s a wonderful offer, Nance. But”

Nancy’s eyes danced. “I know you think I’ve lost my mind. I really mean it, though. Please let me take the tickets! I can’t tell you my reasons yetexcept my cause is a worthy one.”

Helen, looking relieved but bewildered, handed over the tickets. “This is really a break for me,” she said. “Now I can leave for my aunt’s Camp Avondale this evening as I’d hoped. It’s at Moon Lake. I thought I’d never get off, with those tickets unsold!”

Nancy smiled. “Have a grand time, Helen,” she said.

“How about coming along? It’s not expensive and there’s room for lots more girls. We’d have loads of fun.”

“I’d love to,” Nancy replied, “but right now I can’t get away.”

“Maybe you can make it later,” Helen suggested. “If so, just zip on up. I’ll be there for two weeks before the regular summer camp opens.”

The two friends chatted a little longer, then said good-by. Nancy put the car away, then walked slowly toward her house, looking meditatively at the charity tickets in her hand.

“These are to be my passport to the Tophams’ stronghold!”

It was the following afternoon when Nancy approached the large pretentious house belonging to the Tophams.

Bracing herself for what she realized would be a trying interview, Nancy mounted the steps and rang the doorbell. “Here goes,” she thought. “I must be subtle in this maneuver to keep from arousing the

Tophams' suspicions!"

At that moment a maid opened the door, and with a condescending look, waited for Nancy to State her mission.

"Will you please tell Mrs. Topham that Nancy Drew is calling?" she requested. "I'm selling tickets for a charity dance. It's one of the most important functions of the year in River Heights," Nancy added impressively.

It seemed ages to the young sleuth before the maid returned and said that "Madame" would see her. Nancy was ushered into the living room, which was so bizarre in its decor she was startled.

"Such an expensive hodge-podge!" Nancy observed to herself, sitting down. She glanced at the pink carpetwhich to her clashed with the red window draperiesand at an indiscriminate assortment of period furniture mixed with modern.

A haughty voice interrupted her thoughts. "Well, what do you want, Nancy?" Mrs. Topham had sailed grandly into the room and seated herself opposite Nancy,

"I'm selling" Nancy began pleasantly.

"Oh, if you're selling things I'm not interested," the woman broke in rudely. "I can't be handing out money to every solicitor who comes along."

With difficulty Nancy suppressed an angry retort to the cutting remark. "Mrs. Topham," she said evenly, "perhaps your maid didn't make it clear. I am selling tickets to a charity ball which will be one of the loveliest affairs in River Heights this year."

"Oh!" A slight change came over Mrs. Topham's face. Nancy sensed that her words had struck a responsive chord. The woman was well known for her aspirations to be accepted by the best families in River Heights. "Well"

To Nancy's dismay Mrs. Topham's response was cut off by the arrival of Ada and Isabel. The sisters entered the room, but did not at first notice Nancy's presence. They were intently carrying on a disgruntled conversation.

"Really!" Ada was complaining. "I'm positive that woman snubbed us deliberately."

Then she and Isabel caught sight of Nancy and stopped short. They stared coldly at the visitor.

“What are you doing here?” Isabel asked with a patronizing air.

Mrs. Topham answered her daughter’s question. “Nancy is selling tickets to a charity dance, dear. It’s to be a very important affair and I think it will be very beneficial for us to be present.”

Isabel tossed her head disdainfully. “Don’t waste your money, Mother.”

“Isabel’s right,” Ada chimed in. “We don’t want to go to a ball just anybody can go to. We only attend the most exclusive affairs.”

“Absolutely,” Isabel declared in her haughtiest tone. “After all, Ada and I are very particular about the people we choose to meet”

Mrs. Topham hesitated, evidently influenced by her daughters’ argument. Nancy’s heart sank, and she feared her cause was lost. She fully realized that Ada and Isabel would stay away from the dance just to spite her.

As she debated what her next move should be, Richard Topham walked into the living room. He was a thin man, with sparse graying hair. His manner was rather nervous. Mrs. Topham perfunctorily introduced Nancy to her husband.

“I gather you have some tickets to dispose of, Miss Drew,” he said without ceremony. “How many?”

“Why, four,” Nancy replied in some surprise.

“I’ll take them all.” Mr. Topham opened his wallet with a flourish and drew out a hundred-dollar bill. Here you are. Keep the change for your charity.”

His daughters gasped and his wife exclaimed, “Richard! Have you lost your senses? All that money!”

“Listen,” Mr. Topham retorted bluntly. “This donation will entitle us to have our names on the programs as patrons.”

With this remark he slumped into a chair and buried himself in the financial section of the newspaper. His family stared at one another, but they knew that the matter was closed. They never dared disturb

him when he was absorbed in the stock-market reports.

Nancy arose reluctantly. She still had not accomplished the real purpose of her visit, but she had no excuse for prolonging her stay. How could she find out about the Crowley clock? Was it the one on the mantelpiece?

“I must be going,” she said. Then, looking at her wrist watch, she pretended that it had stopped and began to wind it. “What time is it, please?”

“There’s a clock right in front of youon the mantel,” Ada said sharply.

Nancy looked at the timepiece. “So there is,” she remarked casually. “Is it an heirloom, perhaps the old Crowley clock I’ve heard so much about?”

Mrs. Topham looked down her nose. “I should say not! This is a far more expensive one!”

Isabel also rose to Nancy’s bait. “Cousin Josiah’s old clock was a monstrosity. We wouldn’t even have it cluttering up the attic!”

Nancy’s hopes waned, but she asked quickly, “Oh, then you sold it?”

“No,” Ada spoke up contemptuously. “Who’d give any money for that piece of junk? We sent it up to our bungalow at Moon Lake.”

Moon Lake! The words hit Nancy like a thunderbolt. Not only had the Topham girl given Nancy the very information she sought, but Helen Coming’s invitation to Camp Avondale provided a valid reason to visit the resort! Now if she could only figure out how to see the old clock!

As if Ada had read the visitor’s thoughts, she said airily, “We have some really fine pieces up at the cottage, Nancy. If you ever get up that way, drop in to see them. The caretaker will show you around.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much for everything,” Nancy said, trying hard to conceal her excitement. As the door closed behind her, Nancy grinned in anticipation.

“What luck!” she told herself. “Moon Lake, here I come!”

CHAPTER X

Following a Clue

WITH soaring spirits, Nancy walked homeward. “I wonder,” she thought, “how the Tophams will feel about Josiah Crowley’s old clock if it costs them the inheritance they’re counting on.”

At dinner that night Nancy chatted with unusual animation, deciding not to tell of her exciting plans until after Hannah had served dessert.

Mr. Drew, however, sensed that big news was coming. “My dear,” he said, laying a hand on his daughter’s arm, “you look like the cat that swallowed the canary. What’s the big scoop?”

Nancy giggled. “Oh, Dad. I can’t keep any secrets from you.” Then, as the table was cleared, the young sleuth told of her great stroke of luck. “And just think, Helen invited me to her aunt’s camp!”

“Good,” her father commented, smiling. “You can combine business with pleasure, Nancy. Swimming and boating and fun with the girls will provide a much-needed vacation.”

“May I start first thing in the morning?” his daughter asked.

“An excellent idea, Nancy. The change will do wonders for you. Go, by all means.”

Hurriedly she packed a suitcase and the next morning was off to an early start.

Moon Lake was about a fifty-mile drive. One way to go was past the Hoover girls’ farm and Nancy decided to stop there. As she approached the house, the young sleuth heard singing. It was coming from the barn.

“How beautiful!” Nancy thought, as the clear soprano voice went through a series of trills and flutelike scales.

In a moment the singer appeared and Nancy teasingly applauded. Allison’s eyes danced. “Thanks. I was just trying to imitate some of the greats.”

“You’ll be great yourself one of these days,” Nancy prophesied.

“Not unless I get some money to finance lessons,” Allison said. “Any news, Nancy?”

“Sort of. I’ve had a little luck.” At this moment Grace appeared and instantly invited Nancy to stay, but the young detective said she too had work to do. “I hope to have a good report for you soon,” she added, and waved good-by.

Grace’s face brightened and Allison declared cheerfully, “Then there’s still hope? We are so lucky to have you as a friend, Nancy. Come see us again soon. Please.”

Resuming her journey, Nancy soon branched off from the River Road and headed toward Moon Lake. As she drove along, her thoughts revolved constantly around the Crowley relatives and the Hoovers.

She sighed. “How different things would be for them now if Josiah Crowley hadn’t been so secretive!”

Her reverie was ended by the sudden strange actions of her car. It kept veering to the left of the road in spite of her efforts to keep it in the middle. With foreboding, Nancy stopped and got out to make an inspection. As she had suspected, a rear tire was flat.

“Oh dear!” she murmured in disgust. “Such luck!”

Though Nancy was able to change a tire, she never relished the task. Quickly she took out the spare tire from the rear compartment, found the jack and lug wrench, and went to work. By the time her job was completed, she was hot and a little breathless.

“Whew!” she exclaimed, as she started on her way again. “I’ll be ready for a nice, cool swim in Moon Lake!”

It was after twelve o’clock when she came in sight of Camp Avondale, run by Helen’s aunt. Through the tall trees Nancy caught a glimpse of cabins and tents. Beyond, the blue lake sparkled and glimmered in the sunlight.

As Nancy drove into the camp, a group of girls gathered about her car. Helen came running out of a cabin to greet her chum.

“Girls, it’s Nancy Drew!” she exclaimed joyfully and made introductions. Nancy did not know any of the campers, but in no time they made her feel warmly welcome.

“Nancy,” said Helen, “park your car back of the dining hall, then come have lunch.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Nancy laughed. “I’m nearly starved!”

First, she was escorted to the main building where she met Aunt Martha, the camp director, and registered.

“May she stay with me?” Helen asked.

“Certainly, dear. And I hope you have a splendid time, Nancy.”

“I’m sure I shall, Aunt Martha.”

As the two girls walked off Nancy told Helen about selling the charity-dance tickets and gave her the money paid by Mr. Topham.

“He surely was generous!” Helen commented in surprise. Then she smiled wryly. “I have a feeling he did it more for social prestige than sympathy for the cause.”

Nancy scarcely had time to deposit her suitcase under her cot and freshen up after the long ride when lunch was announced by the ringing of a bell. Campers hurried from all directions to the dining hall. The food was plain but appetizing and Nancy ate with zest.

The meal over, she was rushed from one activity to another. The girls insisted that she join them in a hike. Then came a cooling dip in the lake. Nancy enjoyed herself immensely, but the Crowley mystery was never far from her mind.

“I must find out where the Tophams’ cottage is located,” she reminded herself. “And next, manage to go there alone.”

Nancy’s opportunity to accomplish the first part of her quest came when Helen suggested about five o’clock, “How about going for a ride around the lake in the camp launch? There’s just time before supper.”

“Wonderful!” Nancy accepted readily. “By the way, can you see many of the summer cottages from the water?”

“Oh, yes. Lots of them.”

Helen led her friend down to a small clock and with four other girls climbed into the launch, a medium-sized craft.

As one of the campers started the motor, Helen remarked, “It’s always

a relief to us when this engine starts. Once in a while it balks, but you never know when or where."

"Yes," spoke up a girl named Barby. "And when you're stuck this time of year, you're stuck. There are hardly any cottagers up here yet, so their boats are still in winter storage."

As the little launch turned out into the lake, Nancy was entranced with the beautiful sight before her. The delicate azure blue of the sky and the mellow gold of the late afternoon sun were reflected in the shimmering surface of the water.

"What a lovely scene for an oil painting!" she thought.

As they sped along, however, Nancy kept glancing at the cottages, intermingled with tall evergreen trees that bordered the shore line.

"The Tophams have a bungalow up here, haven't they?" she questioned casually.

"Yes, it's across the lake," Helen replied. "We'll come to it soon."

"Is anyone staying there now?"

"Oh, no, the cottage is closed. It's being looked after by Jeff Tucker, the caretaker. He's the tallest, skinniest man I've ever seen outside a circus."

"Is it hard to get to the place?"

"Not if you go by launch. But it's a long way if you take the road around the lake." Helen looked at her friend. "I didn't know you were particularly interested in the Tophams, Nancy."

"Oh, they're not friends of mine, as you know," Nancy returned hastily. "I was merely curious."

After a time, as the launch slowed down and chugged along close to shore, Helen pointed out a wide path through the woods. At the end of it stood a large, rambling white cottage.

"That's the Topham place," she said.

Trying not to appear too eager, Nancy looked intently at the bungalow. She made a quick mental note of its location.

"Tomorrow I'll visit that place and try to solve the mystery!" she told

herself.

CHAPTER XI

An Unexpected Adventure

NANCY awoke the next morning to the fragrant odor of pines. Eager to start out for the Topham bungalow, she dressed quickly.

But in her plans she had reckoned without Helen Corning and her friends. From the moment breakfast was over, Nancy was swept into another whirlwind of activity by the campers of Avondale. The entire day passed without a chance for her to break away.

"Oh, Helen!" Nancy groaned as she tumbled into bed that night. "Tennis matches, canoe races, swimming, water skiingit's been fun. But tomorrow I think I'll stay out of the activities."

Helen laughed gaily. "You'll change your mind after a sound sleep, Nancy. Wait and see."

For answer, Nancy murmured a sleepy good night. But even as she slipped into slumber, she vowed that in the morning she would not be deterred again from visiting the Tophams' summer place!

After breakfast the next day, Nancy stood firm in her resolve. When Helen urged her to accompany the girls on an all-day hike, Nancy shook her head.

"Thanks a lot, but please excuse me today, Helen."

Normally Nancy would have loved going on such a hike. But she had to achieve her plan of sleuthing. Helen, though disappointed, heeded her friend's plea and trudged off with the other campers into the woods.

As soon as they were out of sight, Nancy leaped into action. After obtaining Aunt Martha's permission to use the launch, she hurried down to the dock. Nancy had frequently handled motorboats and was confident she could manage this one.

"Now. Full speed ahead for the Tophams'!"

To her delight the motor started immediately, and Nancy steered out into the lake. As the launch cut through the water, a cool spray blew into her face. The young sleuth felt a thrill of excitement as she guided

the craft toward her destination which might hold a solution to the mystery.

“If only the Tophams’ caretaker will let me in when I get there!” she thought.

Nancy’s heart beat somewhat faster as she neared her goal. But all of a sudden there was a sputter from the engine. The next instant, to Nancy’s utter dismay, the motor gave one long wheeze and died.

“Oh!” she cried aloud.

Nancy knew that the tank held plenty of fuel, for she had checked this before departing. A moment later she recalled Helen’s remark about the engine becoming balky at times.

With a sigh of impatience at the unexpected delay, Nancy examined the motor. For over an hour she worked on it, trying every adjustment she could think of. But her efforts were useless. There was not a sound of response from the motor.

“What miserable luck!” she said aloud. “Of all days for the motor to conk out! This means I won’t get to the Topham cottage after all!”

For a moment Nancy was tempted to swim ashore. To be so close to the bungalow and not be able to reach it was tantalizing. But she resisted the impulse; she could not leave the boat strandedit would drift off and she would be responsible.

“I’ll just have to wait for a passing boat to rescue me,” Nancy decided.

But fate was against her. The hours dragged by and not another craft appeared in sight. Nancy became increasingly uncomfortable as the hot sun beat down on her. Also, she was growing weak from hunger.

“And worst of all,” Nancy thought gloomily, “another whole day is being wasted. I want to get to the bottom of this mystery!”

To occupy her mind, Nancy concentrated once more on the motor. Determinedly she bent over the engine. It was not until the sun sank low in. the sky that she sat up and drew a long breath.

“There!” she declared. “I’ve done everything. If it doesn’t start now, it never will.”

To her relief and astonishment, it responded with a steady roar as if

nothing had ever gone wrong!

Nancy lost no time in heading back toward camp. She dared not attempt to visit the bungalow, since it would be dark very soon.

When finally she eased up to the dock, Nancy saw Helen and her friends awaiting her. They greeted her with delight.

“We were just going to send out a search party for you!” Helen exclaimed. She stopped abruptly and stared at her friend. “You’re sunburned and covered with grease! What happened?”

Nancy laughed. “I had an extended sun bath.” Then she gave a lighthearted account of her mishap as the campers trooped back to their cabins. When Helen learned that Nancy had had nothing to eat since breakfast, she went to the kitchen and brought back some food.

The following morning the young sleuth decided on her next move. Directly after breakfast she began packing.

When Helen entered the cabin she exclaimed in amazement, “Why, Nancy Drew! You’re not leaving camp already!”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to, Helen. Right after lunch. I may be back but I’m not sure, so I’d better take my bag with me.”

“Don’t you like it here?”

“Of course!” Nancy assured her. “I’ve had a wonderful time. It’s just that there’s something very important I must attend to at once.”

Helen looked at her friend searchingly, then grinned. “Nancy Drew, you’re working on some mystery with your father!”

“Well, sort of,” Nancy admitted. “But I’ll try to get back. Okay?”

“Oh, please do,” Helen begged.

Nancy went to the office to pay Aunt Martha and explain her hasty departure. After lunch she set off in her car to a chorus of farewells from the campers, who sadly watched her depart.

She headed the car toward the end of the lake, then took the dirt road leading to the Topham cottage. Soon she came to a fork in the woods.

“Now, which way shall I turn for the bungalow?” she wondered. After a moment’s hesitation, Nancy calculated that she should turn left

toward the water and did so.

The going was rather rough due to ruts in the road. Two of them, deeper than the others, apparently had been made by a heavy truck.

“The tracks appear fresh,” Nancy mused.

As she drove along, the young sleuth noticed a number of summer cottages. Most of them were still boarded up, since it was early in the season. As she gazed at one of them, the steering wheel was nearly wrenched from her hand by a crooked rut. As Nancy turned the steering wheel, to bring the car back to the center of the narrow road, one hand accidentally touched the horn. It blared loudly in the still woods.

“That must have scared all the birds and animals.” Nancy chuckled.

Around a bend in the road, she caught sight of a white bungalow ahead on the right side of the road.

There was no sign at the entrance to the driveway to indicate who the owner was, but a wooded path leading down to the lake looked like the one she had seen from the water.

“I think I’ll walk down to the shore and look at the cottage from there,” Nancy determined. “Then I’ll know for sure if this is the place Helen pointed out.”

Nancy parked at the edge of the road and got out. To her surprise, she observed that the truck’s tire marks turned into the driveway. A second set of tracks indicated that the vehicle had backed out and gone on down the road.

“Delivering supplies for the summer, no doubt,” Nancy told herself.

She went down the path to the water, then turned around to look at the cottage.

“It’s the Tophams’ all right,” Nancy decided.

Instead of coming back by way of the path, she decided to take a short cut through the woods. “With mounting anticipation of solving the Crowley mystery, she reached the road and hurried up the driveway.

“I hope the caretaker is here,” she thought

Nancy suddenly stopped short with a gasp of astonishment. “Why, the

Tophams must be moving out!”

The front and side doors of the cottage stood wide open. Some of the furniture on the porch was overturned and various small household items were strewn along the driveway.

Nancy bent to examine some marks in the soft earth. She noted that several were boot prints, while others were long lines probably caused by dragging cartons and furniture across the lawn.

“That must have been a moving van’s tracks I saw,” Nancy told herself. “But the Tophams didn’t say anything about moving.” She frowned in puzzlement.

Her feeling persisted and grew strong as she walked up the steps of the cottage porch. Nancy knocked loudly on the opened door. No response. Nancy rapped again. Silence.

Where was Jeff Tucker, the caretaker? Why wasn’t he on hand to keep an eye on the moving activities? An air of complete desertion hung over the place.

“There’s something very strange about this,” she thought.

Curious and puzzled, Nancy entered the living room. Again her eyes met a scene of disorder. Except for a few small pieces, the room was bare of furniture. Even the draperies had been pulled from their rods and all floor coverings were gone.

“Hm! Most of the furnishings have been taken out,” Nancy thought. “I suppose the movers will be back for the other odds and ends.”

She made a careful tour of the first floor. All but one room had been virtually emptied. This was a small study. As Nancy entered it, she noticed that the rug lay rolled up and tied, and some of the furniture had evidently been shifted in readiness for moving.

“Funny I didn’t hear anything about the Tophams deciding to give up their cottage,” she murmured. “And I must say those moving men were awfully careless”

A vague suspicion that had been forming in the back of Nancy’s mind now came into startling focus. “Those men may not be movers!” she burst out “They may be thieves!”

At once Nancy thought of the dark-gray van which had stopped at the

Turners. “Those men may be the same ones who robbed them!”

That would explain, Nancy thought fearfully, the evidences of the truck’s hasty departure. “Probably the thieves were scared away when I sounded my horn!”

Nancy glanced about uneasily. What if the men were still nearby, watching for a chance to return and pick up the remaining valuables? The realization that she was alone, some distance from the nearest house, swept over her. A tingling sensation crept up Nancy’s spine.

But resolutely she shook off her nervousness. “At least I must see if the Crowley clock is still here,” Nancy reminded herself, and then went through the bungalow again.

She found no trace of the timepiece, however. “I guess the thieves took that too,” Nancy concluded. “I’d better report this robbery to the police right now.” She looked about for a phone but there was none. “I’ll have to drive to the nearest State Police headquarters.”

Nancy started toward the front door. Passing a window, she glanced out, then paused in sheer fright. A man, wearing a cap pulled low over his eyes, was stalking up the driveway toward the cottage. He was not tall and slender like the caretaker. This stranger was rather short and heavy-set.

“This man fits the Turners’ description! He must be one of the thieves who stole the silver heirlooms!” Nancy thought wildly.

CHAPTER XII

A Desperate Situation

FOR A moment Nancy stood frozen to the spot, positive that the man who was coming to the Topham cottage was one of the thieves.

But she hesitated only an instant. Then she turned and ran back into the study. Too late she realized that she had trapped herself, for this room had no other door.

Nancy started back toward the living room. But before she had taken half a dozen steps she knew that escape had been cut off from that direction. The man had reached the porch steps.

“It won’t do a bit of good to talk to him,” she reasoned. “I’ll hide, and when he leaves, I’ll follow him in my car and report him to the police!”

Frantically the young sleuth glanced about for a hiding place. A closet offered the only possible refuge. She scurried inside and closed the door.

Nancy was not a second too soon. She had scarcely shut the door when she heard the tread of the man’s heavy shoes on the floor just outside. Peeping cautiously through a tiny crack in the door, she saw the heavy-set man come into the study. His face wore a cruel expression.

As he turned toward the closet where she huddled, Nancy hardly dared to breathe, lest her presence be detected. Apparently the man noticed nothing amiss, because his eyes rested only casually on the door.

Nancy’s hiding place was anything but comfortable. It was dark and musty, and old clothing hung from nails on the walls. As dust assailed her nostrils, she held a handkerchief to her face.

“If I sneeze he’ll surely find me,” she told herself.

She felt around and once came close to ripping her hand on a sharp nail. Then she came upon something soft on a shelf and imagined it was a sleeping cat. She drew back, then touched it more cautiously.

“Only an old fur cap,” she told herself in disgust. “Ooo, now I feel like sneezing more than ever!”

She held one hand over her mouth hard and waited in agony. But presently the desire to sneeze passed and Nancy breathed more freely.

When she dared to peep out through the crack a second time, she saw that two other rough-looking men had come into the room. One was short and stout, the other taller. Nancy was sure that neither of these two men was the caretaker, because Helen Corning had mentioned that the man was skinny.

The heavy-set man who had come in first seemed to be the leader, for he proceeded to issue orders. “Get a move on!” he growled. “We haven’t got all day unless we want to be caught That girl you saw, Jake, may be back any time from the shore. And she just might get snoopy.”

The man addressed as Jake scowled. “What’s the matter with you, Sid? Going chicken? If that girl comes around, we’ll just give her a smooth story and send her on her way.”

“Cut out the yaking,” said Sid. “Parky, you and Jake take that desk out of here.”

There was no doubt now in Nancy’s mind. She was trapped by a clever gang of thieves! She could only continue to watch and listen helplessly from her hiding place.

The two men lifted the heavy piece of furniture and started with it to the door. But they did not move swiftly enough to satisfy the leader, and he berated them savagely.

Jake turned on him. “If you’re in such a hurry, why don’t you bring the van back to the driveway, instead of leaving it hidden on that road in the woods?”

“And have someone driving past here see us!” sneered the leader. “Now get going!”

Little by little the men stripped the room of everything valuable. Nancy was given no opportunity to escape. Sid remained in the room while the others made several trips to the van.

“Well, I guess we have all the stuff that’s worth anything now,” Sid muttered at last.

He turned to follow his companions, who already had left the room, but in the doorway he paused for a final careful survey of the room.

At that same moment Nancy felt an uncontrollable urge to sneeze. She tried to muffle the sound, but to no avail.

The thief wheeled about. “Hey! What”

Walking directly to the closet, he flung open the door. Instantly he spotted Nancy and angrily jerked her out.

“Spying on us, eh?” he snarled.

Nancy faced the man defiantly. “I wasn’t spying on anyone.”

“Then what were you doing in that closet?” the thief demanded, his eyes narrowing to slits.

“I came to see the caretaker.”

“Looking for him in a funny place, ain’t you?” the man sneered.

Nancy realized that she was in a desperate situation. But she steeled herself not to show any of her inward fears.

“I must keep calm,” she told herself firmly. Aloud, she explained coolly, “I heard someone coming and I just felt a bit nervous.”

“Well, you’re going to be a lot more nervous,” the man said threateningly. “This will be the last time you’ll ever stick your nose in business that doesn’t concern you!”

A fresh wave of fright swept over Nancy, but resolutely she held on to her courage. “You have no right to be here, helping yourself to the Tophams’ furniture!” she retorted. “You should be turned over to the police!”

“Well, you’ll never get the chance to do it.” The ringleader laughed loudly. “You’ll wish you’d never come snoopin’ around here. I’ll give you the same treatment the caretaker got.”

“The caretaker!” Nancy gasped in horror. “What have you done to him?”

“You’ll find out in good time.”

Nancy gave a sudden agile twist, darted past the man, and raced for

the door. The thief gave a cry of rage, and in one long leap overtook her. He caught Nancy roughly by the arm.

“Think you’re smart, eh?” he snarled. “Well, I’m smarter!”

Nancy struggled to get away. She twisted and squirmed, kicked and clawed. But she was helpless in the viselike grip of the powerful man.

“Let me go!” Nancy cried, struggling harder. “Let me go!”

Sid, ignoring her pleas, half dragged her across the room. Opening the closet door, he flung her inside.

Nancy heard a key turn.

“Now you can spy all you want!” Sid sneered. “But to make sure nobody’ll let you out, I’ll just take this key along.”

When Nancy could no longer hear the tramp of “his heavy boots she was sure Sid had left the house. For a moment a feeling of great relief engulfed her.

But the next instant Nancy’s heart gave a leap. As she heard the muffled roar of the van starting up in the distance, a horrifying realization gripped her.

“They’ve left me here toto starve!” she thought frantically.

CHAPTER XIII

The Frustrating Wait

AT FIRST Nancy was too frightened to think logically. She beat upon the door with her fists, but the heavy oak panels would not give way.

“Help! Help!” she screamed.

At last, exhausted by her efforts to force the door open, she sank down on the floor. The house was as silent as a tomb. Bad as her predicament was, Nancy felt thankful that enough air seeped into the closet to permit normal breathing.

Although she had little hope that there was anyone within miles of the cottage, Nancy got to her feet, raised her voice, and again shouted for help. Her cries echoed through the empty house and seemed to mock her.

“Oh, why didn’t I have enough sense to tell Helen where I was going?” she berated herself miserably. “The girls at camp will never dream that I came here.”

Then Nancy remembered mournfully that her father thought she intended to remain at Camp Avondale for a week! He would not become alarmed over her absence until it was too late.

“Someone may find my car at the side of the road,” Nancy reasoned, “but it isn’t very likely. Few persons pass this way so early in the season.”

She wondered, with a shudder, what had become of Jeff Tucker. The thief called Sid had hinted that the caretaker had received the same treatment as Nancy. If he was locked up somewhere, she could expect no aid from him.

“Those thieves will get so far away that even if I could get out of here, I’d be too late.”

As the full significance of the situation dawned upon Nancy, panic again took possession of her. In a desperate attempt to break down the door, she threw her weight against it again and again. She pounded on the panels until her fingers were bruised and bleeding. At last she sank down again on the floor to rest and tried to force herself to reason

calmly.

“I’m only wasting my strength this way. I must try to think logically.”

Nancy recalled that it was sometimes possible to pick a lock with a wire. She removed a bobby pin from her hair, opened it, and began to work at the lock. But in the darkness she could not see and made no progress. After fifteen minutes she gave up the task in disgust.

“It’s no use,” she decided dejectedly. “II guess I’m in here for good.”

She began to think of her father, of Hannah. Gruen, of Helen Corning, and other dear friends. Would she ever see them again? As despondency claimed Nancy, she was dangerously near tears.

“This will never do,” she reprimanded herself sternly. “I must keep my head and try to think of, some way to escape.”

The trapped girl began to rummage in the closet, hoping that by some lucky chance she might find a tool which would help her force the lock of the door. Nancy searched carefully through the pockets of every garment which hung from the hooks. She groped over every inch of the floor.

She found nothing useful, however, and the cloud of dust which she had stirred up made breathing more difficult than before. The closet had become uncomfortably warm by this time. Longingly she thought of the fresh air and cool lake water from which she was closed off.

Then, unexpectedly, Nancy’s hand struck something hard. Quickly investigating with her fingers, she discovered a wooden rod suspended high overhead. It was fastened to either side wall and ran the length of the closet. Evidently it had once been used for dress and coat hangers.

“I might be able to use that rod to break out a panel of the door,” Nancy thought hopefully. “It feels strong and it’s about the right size.”

She tugged at the rod with all her might. When it did not budge, she swung herself back and forth on it. At last, amid the cracking of plaster, one side gave way. Another hard jerk brought the rod down.

To Nancy’s bitter, disappointment, she found that unfortunately the rod was too long to use as a ram in the cramped space. But after further examination, she discovered that it had pointed ends.

“I might use this rod as a wedge in the crack,” she thought hopefully.

The young sleuth inserted one end in the space between the hinges and the door, and threw all her weight against the rod. At first the door did not move in the slightest.

“That old Greek scientist, Archimedes, didn’t know what he was talking about when he said the world could be moved with a lever,” Nancy murmured. “I’d like to see him move this door!”

As she applied steady pressure to the rod a second time, she saw that the hinges were beginning to give. Encouraged, Nancy again pushed full force on the “lever.”

“It’s coming!” she cried.

Once more she threw her weight against the rod. A hinge tore from the casing and the door sagged. It was now easy to insert the wedge, and Nancy joyously realized that success would soon be hers. With renewed strength she continued her efforts.

Then, just as another hinge gave way, she was startled to hear footsteps. Someone came running into the study, and a heavy body hurled itself against the door of the closet.

For a moment Nancy was stunned. Could this be one of the thieves who had heard the noise she had made and had returned to make sure that she did not escape? She discarded the theory quickly. Surely the three men would want to get far away as quickly as possible. But who was this newcomer? One of the Tophams?

“So, one o’ you ornery robbers got yourself locked up, did you?” came an indignant male voice. “That’ll teach you to try puttin’ one over on old Jeff Tucker. You won’t be doin’ any more pilferin’. I got you surrounded.”

The caretaker! Nancy heaved a sigh of fervent relief. “Let me out!” she pleaded. “I’m not one of the thieves! If you’ll only let me out of here, I’ll explain every thing!”

There was silence for a moment. Then the voice on the other side of the door said dubiously, “Say, you aimin’ to throw me off, imitatin’ a lady’s voice? Well, it won’t do you any good! No, sir. Old Jeff Tucker’s not gettin’ fooled again!”

Nancy decided to convince the man beyond doubt. She gave a long,

loud feminine scream.

“All right, all right, ma’am. I believe you! No man could make that racket. This way out, lady!”

Expectantly Nancy waited. But the door did not open. Then she heard to her dismay:

“If that ain’t the limit. The key’s gone and I’ve left my ring of extra keys somewhere. It’s not in my pockets.”

Nancy groaned. “Oh, Mr. Tucker, you must find it. Have you looked in every one of your pockets? Please hurry and get me out.”

“Hold on, ma’am,” the caretaker said soothingly. “I’ll just check again.”

Nancy was beginning to think she would still have to break down the door, when she heard Jeff Tucker exclaim, “Found it! You were right, ma’am. Key was in my back pocket all the time. It”

“Please open the door!” Nancy broke in desperately.

A key turned in the lock and the bolt clicked. Joyfully Nancy pushed the door open and stepped out. For a moment the bright sunlight in the room almost blinded her. When her vision adjusted, she saw a very tall, thin, elderly man in blue shirt and overalls. He stared at her with concern and amazement.

“Mr. Tucker,” she explained quickly, “I’m Nancy Drew. I was here looking for you when those awful thieves came and locked me in the closet.” She paused and gazed at the caretaker. “I’m glad to see that you’re all right. Their leader told me they’d locked you up too.” She then asked the elderly man to tell his story.

Jeff Tucker seemed embarrassed as he began to speak. “I was plain hornswoggled by those critters, Miss Drew. They pulled up here in a movin’ van, and told me I’d better get after some trespassers they’d seen nearby. So,” the elderly man went on with a sigh, “I believed ‘em. One of the men went with me down to the lake and locked me in a shed. I just got out.” He shook his head sadly. “And all this time they was robbin’ the place. Guess I’ll be fired.”

Secretly Nancy was inclined to agree, knowing the Tophams. But aloud she said reassuringly:

“Don’t worry, Mr. Tucker. We’ll report this robbery to the State Police immediately. Perhaps the troopers can catch the thieves before they get rid of the stolen furniture.”

The caretaker looked somewhat relieved. “And I can sure give a good description o’ those crooks. I’d never forget their ugly faces!”

“Fine,” said Nancy. A sudden thought struck her. “Oh, before we go, Mr. Tucker, tell me, was there an old clock in this house? A tall, square-faced mantel clock?”

Jeff Tucker’s bright blue eyes squinted. “Mantel clock? Hm. Why, sure enough!” He pointed to the mantel over the living-room fireplace. “Sat right up there. Got so used to seein’ it, I couldn’t remember for a minute. Don’t know how come they took that too. Never thought it was worth much. The Tophams never bothered windin’ the thing.”

Nancy’s pulse quickened. Knowing that the clock had been stolen, she was more eager than ever to have the thieves apprehended. She urged Jeff Tucker to hurry out to her car.

“Where’s the nearest State Police headquarters?” she asked him as they climbed into the convertible.

“There’s none till you get to Melborne, Miss Drew.”

“We’ll hurry.”

Nancy headed as fast as possible for the highway. Would she succeed in heading off the thieves and recovering the old Crowley clock, so she could learn its secret?

CHAPTER XIV

A Tense Chase

"WHICH way is Melborne?" Nancy asked the caretaker when they reached the highway.

"Down there." He pointed.

"That's the direction the thieves took," Nancy told him, noting the dust and tire marks which revealed the van's exit onto the highway. "But," she added, glancing at the dashboard clock, "they're probably too far away by this time for us to catch them."

"Yes, ding it," Jeff muttered.

Nancy drove as rapidly as the law permitted toward Melborne. All the while, Jeff Tucker peered from one side of the road to the other.

"Those rascal thieves might just have nerve enough to stop an' count their loot," he said to Nancy. "So I'm keepin' a sharp eye peeled."

Nancy smiled in spite of the gravity of the situation. "Maybe," she replied. "Though I doubt that those men would be so reckless."

"Oh, I don't mean out in plain sight. They might have pulled off the road, back o' some o' these closed-up summer places."

"We'll watch for their tire marks on any dirt side road," the young sleuth said.

Jeff became so absorbed in looking for the van's tire marks that he never asked Nancy why she had come to see him at the Topham house.

"Those fake movers," he said, as they neared the outskirts of Melborne. "I wonder how far they went."

Nancy did not reply until they came to a crossroad, then she pointed. "They turned north here on this dirt road. How much farther is it to Melborne?"

"Only a mile."

As they came into the little town, Nancy asked her companion,

“Which way to State Police headquarters?”

“Go right down Central Avenue to Maple Street. Turn left, and there it is.”

Reaching headquarters, Nancy parked the car and hopped out. Jeff Tucker followed as she walked briskly into the office.

“I want to report a robbery,” she told the desk sergeant after identifying herself.

For a moment the officer, taken aback, looked in astonishment at Nancy. “You’ve been robbed?” he asked. “In our town?”

“No, no!” Nancy cried out. She then gave a quick but complete resume of what had taken place at the Tophams’ cottage. Jeff Tucker added his account.

The police officer needed no further urging. Immediately he summoned four men and issued orders. “Now,” he said, turning to Nancy, “have you any idea which road the thieves took?”

“Yes, Officer. When we passed the road crossing a mile outside of town, I saw their truck tracks on the dirt road leading north. I’ll be glad to show you.”

“Good. Lead the way. But first I’ll send out a general alarm.”

“Hurry!” Nancy begged as she started out. “Those thieves have at least an hour’s head start!”

Jeff Tucker had been advised to return to his home. Accordingly he telephoned his son to come and pick him up in his car.

“Good luck!” he called, as the others pulled away. “I sure don’t know how I’m goin’ to break this to the Tophams.”

Nancy was sorry for him, but she felt a thrill of excitement as she proceeded up the street, the police car following close behind.

Beyond the town, Nancy chose the road which she felt certain the thieves had used. The two cars sped along until Nancy unexpectedly came to a fork. Both branches were paved and no tire marks were visible. Nancy stopped. The police car pulled up alongside.

“What’s the matter?” asked the officer in charge, whose name was Elton.

“I’m not sure which way to go now.”

The policemen sprang from their automobile and began to examine the road. Officer Elton said that if a moving van had passed that way, its tire marks had been obliterated by other vehicles. It was impossible to tell which route the thieves had traveled.

“It’ll be strictly guesswork from here,” Officer Elton said to Nancy.

“In that case,” replied Nancy, “it’s my guess that the van went to the left.” She pointed to a sign which read: Garwin, 50 miles. “Isn’t Garwin a fairly large city?” she queried.

“Yes.”

“Perhaps the thieves headed that way to dispose of the stolen furniture.”

The officer nodded approvingly. “Sounds reasonable,” he said. “Well, in any case, we can’t go much farther, because we’re near the state line.”

Nancy had another thought. “I’ll take the road to Garwin and swing around toward River Heights.” She smiled. “If I see those thieves, I’ll let you know.”

“Well, you watch out, young lady. Those men may lock you up again!”

“I will. Anyhow, there’ll be plenty of traffic as soon as I reach the main highway.”

Without giving the policemen an opportunity for further objection, Nancy started up and swung her car to the left. She noted in her rear-view mirror that the squad car had turned onto the right-hand road.

“The officers must have picked up a clue,” Nancy said to herself. “But I certainly wish I could spot that van and maybe find a chance to look in the old clock!”

Nancy soon reached the main road. As mile after mile of highway spun behind her, Nancy’s hopes grew dim. There were a number of side roads, any one of which the moving van might have taken to elude pursuers.

The young sleuth decided to adhere to her original theorythat Sid and his pals had headed for Garwinand kept on the main highway.

“Those thieves think Jeff and I are still locked up and won’t suspect they’re being followed,” she assured herself. Smiling, she thought hopefully, “In that case they won’t be on their guard!”

About ten minutes later Nancy stopped at a service station to have her car refueled, and on impulse asked the attendant, “Did you by any chance see a moving van pass here recently?”

“Sure did, miss,” was the prompt answer. “About half an hour ago. I noticed it because the driver was going at a terrific speed for a van.”

Heartened, Nancy thanked him and resumed her pursuit, going past the turn for River Heights. “If only I can overtake the truck and somehow examine the Crowley clock before I have to report to the police!” she thought.

Again time elapsed and Nancy still saw no sign of a moving van on the highway. It was growing dusk and she decided that she would have to admit defeat.

“I never caught up to them.” She sighed in disappointment, and turning into the opposite lane, headed back for the River Heights road.

Just then Nancy recalled that a little beyond the service station where she had stopped, she had noticed a rather run-down old inn. It was a slim hope, she knew, but the thieves might have put their van behind it while having a meal there.

“I’ll go in and ask, anyhow,” she decided.

Nancy increased her speed as much as she dared and within a few minutes came in sight of the inn. It stood back from the road a short distance and was half-hidden by tall trees. In front of the building a battered sign bearing the name Slack Horse Inn creaked back and forth from a post. There was no sign of the van. Beyond the inn Nancy glimpsed a garage and a large barn. The doors to both were closed.

“I wonder,” mused Nancy, “if the moving van is parked inside either one.”

At the far side of the inn was a small woods with a narrow road leading into it. For safety’s sake, Nancy thought it best to park her car on this little-used road.

She turned off the car lights, pocketed the key, and walked back to the

curving driveway leading to the inn. As Nancy made her way forward, her heart pounded. There were tire marks which could belong to Sid's van I They led to the barn I

"Maybe those thieves are eating," she thought. "I'll look."

As Nancy stepped onto the porch, the sound of raucous laughter reached her ears. She tiptoed to a window and peered inside. What the young sleuth saw made her gasp, but she felt a glow of satisfaction.

In a dingy, dimly lighted room three men were seated about a table, eating voraciously. They were the thieves who had robbed the Topham bungalow!

CHAPTER XV

Nancy's Risky Undertaking

"I MUST notify the police at once!" Nancy told herself as she recognized the three thieves.

Turning away from the window, she crept noiselessly from the porch. She was about to make a dash for her car when a sudden thought occurred to her.

"If the gang have parked their van in the barn, now's my chance to look for the Crowley clock. I'm sure those men will be eating for a while, or they may even be staying overnight."

Acting on the impulse, Nancy sprinted to her car. Hastily she snatched a flashlight from the compartment, since it was now dark outside.

She made her way cautiously to the rear of the inn. Reaching the barn, she tried the closed doors, her heart pounding. They had not been locked!

As she slid back one of the doors, it squeaked in an alarming fashion. Anxiously Nancy glanced toward the inn, but so far as she could tell, her actions were unobserved. There was no one in sight.

Focusing her flashlight, she peered hopefully into the dark interior. A cry of satisfaction escaped her lips.

In front of her stood the moving van!

"What luck!" she exclaimed, snapping off her light.

With a last cautious glance in the direction of the inn, she hastily stepped inside and closed the barn door. With it shut, the interior of the barn was pitch dark.

Nancy switched on her flashlight again and played it over the moving van. She saw that its rear doors were closed.

Securing a firm grip on the handle, she gave it a quick turn. To her dismay the door did not open. The thieves had locked the van!

"Oh dear! Now what shall I do?" she wondered frantically. "I'll never

be able to break the lock."

Desperately Nancy glanced about. She dared not remain many minutes in the barn, lest the thieves return and find her there. But she had to find out whether the Crowley clock was in the van.

"Perhaps the keys were left in the ignition," Nancy thought hopefully.

She rushed to the front of the van and clambered into the driver's seat. But there were no keys hanging from the ignition lock.

Nancy's mind worked frantically. She must find the keys! Perhaps the men had not taken them into the inn but had concealed them in the truck. Suddenly she remembered that people sometimes hide automobile keys under the floor mat. It was barely possible that the thieves had done this.

Hastily she pulled up a corner of the mat Her flashlight revealed a small ring of keys!

"Luck was with me this time," she murmured, and quickly snatching up the ring, she ran back to the rear of the van.

After trying several of the keys, she at last found one which fitted the lock. Turning it, she jerked open the door. Nancy flashed her light about inside the truck. To her joy she recognized the van's contents as the furniture stolen from the Topham cottage!

"What will I do if the clock is on the bottom of the load?" Nancy wondered as she surveyed the pile of furniture. "I'll never find it."

Dexterously she swung herself up into the truck and flashed the light slowly about on chairs, tables, rugs, and boxes. There was no sign of the Crowley clock.

Then the beam rested for a moment on an object in a far corner. With a low cry of delight, Nancy saw that her search had been rewarded. Protected by a blanket, an old-fashioned mantel clock rested on top of a table in the very front of the van!

The young sleuth scrambled over the pieces oŁ furniture as she tried to reach the clock. Her dress caught on something sharp and tore. Finally she arrived within arm's reach of the blanket. She grasped it and carefully pulled the clock toward her.

One glance at the timepiece assured her that it fitted the description

Abby Rowen had given her. It had a square face and the top was ornamented with a crescent.

“The Crowley clock at last!” Nancy whispered almost unbelievingly.

But as she stood staring at it, her keen ears detected the sound of voices. The thieves!

“I’ll be caught!” flashed through her mind. “And I won’t be able to escape a second time!”

Clutching the blanket and the clock tightly in her arms, Nancy scrambled over the piled-up furniture as she struggled to get out of the truck before it was too late.

Reaching the door, she leaped lightly to the floor. She could now hear heavy footsteps coming closer and closer.

Nancy shut the truck doors as quickly as possible, and searched wildly for the keys.

“Oh, what did I do with them?” she thought frantically.

She saw that they had fallen to the floor and snatched them up. Hurriedly inserting the correct key in the lock, she secured the doors.

But as Nancy wheeled about she heard men’s angry voices directly outside. Already someone was starting to slide back the barn door!

“Oh, what shall I do?” Nancy thought in despair. “I’m cornered!”

She realized instantly that she could not hope to run to the front of the car and place the keys under the mat where she had found them. “I’ll just put them on the floor,” she decided quickly. “Maybe the men will think they dropped them.”

Then, glancing frantically about for a hiding place, Nancy saw an empty grain bin. Running to it, still holding the clock, she climbed inside and dropped the blanket over her head just as one of the barn doors slid open.

One of the men was speaking loudly. Nancy recognized the voice instantly. It belonged to Sid, the ringleader of the thieves.

“You had enough to eat,” he growled. “We’re goin’ to get out of here before we have the cops down on our heads.”

He climbed into the cab and turned on the headlights. Nancy held her breath. Would her hiding place be discovered? But the men apparently did not even look toward the bin.

In a moment Sid cried out, “What did you do with those keys? Thought you put ‘em under the floor mat.”

“I did.”

“Well, they ain’t here.”

“Honest, boss, I”

“Then come and find ‘em, and don’t be all night about it either!”

“All right. Get out of the way and give me a chance!”

As Jake went to the truck and began a careful search for the keys, Nancy listened fearfully from her hiding place.

“Say, if you’ve lost ‘em” the leader did not finish the threat, for at that moment the third man announced:

“Here they are on the floor! You must have thought you’d put ‘em in your pocket, Jake, and dropped ‘em instead.”

“I didn’t!” the other retorted.

The thieves were obviously in a quarrelsome mood. Just then the leader interposed:

“Cut out the yaking! We ain’t got no time for a fight unless we want to land behind bars!”

“And if we do, it’ll be your fault, Sid Sax. You left that girl to starve”

“Shut up!” the leader snarled.

After a few more angry words, the three thieves climbed into the front seat and in a moment the engine started.

In relief Nancy heard the men go. The moment they were a safe distance from the barn, she climbed out of the bin.

Nancy watched long enough to make certain that the van had taken the road to Garwin. Then, snatching up her flashlight and clutching the precious clock in her arms, she turned and ran. “I’d better cut

through the woods," she decided.

As Nancy darted among the trees, she cast an anxious glance over her shoulder, but to her intense relief she saw that she was not being followed. There seemed to be no one in the vicinity of the Black Horse Inn.

"I had a narrow escape that time," the young sleuth told herself as she ran. "I hate to think what might have happened if I had been discovered!" She clutched the mantel clock more tightly in her arms. "But it was worth the risk I took! I found the clock and maybe the secret of Josiah Crowley's will!"

Reaching the car, Nancy sprang inside. She took the key from her pocket and inserted it in the ignition lock.

"I'll notify the police as fast as I can," she decided. "Perhaps the state troopers can catch those men before they dispose of the furniture."

Then, just as Nancy was about to start the motor, her glance fell upon the Crowley clock which she had placed on the seat beside her. Did it contain old Josiah's mysterious notebook as she suspected?

"Oh, I must find out!" She got her flashlight.

Since the clock was too unwieldy to open inside the car, Nancy stepped out and laid it on the ground. She unfastened the glass door and ran her hand around the walls. There was nothing inside. She tried the back. Only the mechanism of the timepiece was there.

"Gone!" Nancy groaned. "Oh dear! Has my luck run out?"

Could it be, she wondered, that the Tophams had discovered the notebook only to destroy it? Nancy discarded this thought as quickly as it came to mind, for she recalled the conversation she had overheard between Ada and Isabel. No, the Tophams were as ignorant as herself concerning the location of a later will.

It was more likely that Abby Rowen had been confused in her story. After all, she had not de-dared that the notebook would be found inside the clock. Nancy herself had made the deduction.

"I was almost certain I'd find the notebook," she murmured in disappointment. But a moment later she took heart again. "It must be here somewhere," she told herself.

Turning the clock upside down, Nancy gave it a hard shake. Something inside moved. Hopefully she repeated the action.

“Unless I’m wrong,” Nancy thought excitedly, “there’s something inside this clock besides the works!” She examined it more closely. “An extra piece of cardboard back of the face! And something in between the two! The notebook maybe!”

After a vain attempt to remove the heavy cardboard face with her fingers, Nancy took a small screw driver from the glove compartment. With the tool it required but an instant to remove the two hands of the clock and jerk off the face.

As the cardboard fell to the floor, Nancy peered inside and gave a low cry of joy.

There, at one side of the clock, attached to a hook in the top, dangled a tiny dark-blue notebook!

CHAPTER XVI

The Capture

EAGERLY Nancy removed the little notebook from the hook. By holding the book directly under the beam of her flashlight, she could make out the words on the cover:

Property of Josiah Crowley.

“I’ve found it at last!” she thought excitedly.

Quickly turning the first few pages, she saw that they were yellowed with age. The writing was fine and cramped, and the ink had faded. The pages were crowded with business notations, and it was difficult to make out the words.

Nancy was thrilled, for she was positive that the notebook would disclose what Josiah Crowley had done with his last will. Yet, she realized that she could not hope to read through the book without a considerable loss of precious time. She must not delay another instant in reporting to the police.

“I’ll read the notebook later,” she decided, and tucked it into her pocket. Then she put the clock together.

Hurriedly laying the timepiece back on the car seat, Nancy covered it with her coat and slid behind the wheel. Starting the engine, she swung the convertible onto the highway. Nancy cast an anxious glance in the direction the thieves had taken, and watched for side roads down which the men might turn to avoid the main highway.

“Perhaps I’d better phone the State Police from the first service station or store I come to.”

Then suddenly she noticed a sign: Alternate route to Garwin. Main road under repair.

Reaching the intersection, she stopped to see if the familiar tire marks of the van indicated it had turned onto this dirt road. It had!

“Now what shall I do?”

As Nancy debated, she saw a car coming toward her. Her hopes

soared. She could not be mistakenit was a police prowl car with a red revolving roof light!

Instantly Nancy grabbed her own flashlight and jumped from the car. Standing at the side of the road, she waved her light and in a few minutes the police sedan stopped.

“I’m Nancy Drew,” she said hurriedly to the two men inside. “Are you looking for the furniture thieves in the van?”

“Yes, we are. You’re the girl who reported them?”

Nancy nodded, then pointed down the side road. “I think those are their tire marks. The men were at the Black Horse Inn, but left.”

“You can identify them?” the driver asked.

“Oh, yes.”

“Then please follow us. I’ll radio for a car to approach the thieves’ van from the other end of the road.”

The police car sped down the bad road to Garwin, with Nancy following closely behind. They rode for several miles.

“Oh dear,” thought Nancy, “I must have been wrong! We should have overtaken the van by this time.”

Another ten minutes passed. Then, unexpectedly, she caught a glimpse of a red taillight on the Toad far ahead.

“It must be the van!” Nancy told herself hopefully. “The light doesn’t appear to be moving fast enough for an automobile.”

Evidently the police were of the same opinion, for at that moment their car slowed down. Nancy figured they would not stop the van until they saw the other police car arriving from the opposite direction. A few moments later she could see headlights in the distance.

The squad car in front of Nancy now sped ahead and pulled up alongside the van. “Pull over” one of the officers shouted to the man in the cab.

Instead of doing so, the van put on a burst of speed. But in order to avoid smashing into the oncoming squad car, the driver pulled too far to the right. The van swerved sharply. Its two right wheels went off

into a deep ditch, and the vehicle toppled over.

In an instant the officers were out of the car and had the fugitives covered.

By this time Nancy, who had stopped her car at the side of the road, came running up. One of the officers turned to her and asked, “Can you identify these men?”

As a light was flashed upon each of the thieves in turn, Nancy nodded. “This one is Sid, who locked me in the closet,” she declared, pointing to the leader. “The others are Jake and Parky.”

The prisoners stared in complete disbelief. They were astounded to see Nancy Drew standing there. When it dawned on Sid that she evidently was responsible for their capture, he started to say something, then changed his mind and remained silent The prisoners were quickly identified from licenses and other papers as wanted criminals.

One of the other officers opened the rear of the van and asked Nancy if she could identify the stolen furniture.

“Some of it,” she replied. “That desk was taken from the room in which I was locked in the closet.”

“Good enough,” said the trooper. “These men will get long sentences for this. They’ll be held on several charges. Are you willing to go with us and prefer charges against them?”

“Yes, if it’s necessary,” Nancy promised reluctantly. “But I don’t live in this county and I’m eager to get home right away. Don’t you have enough evidence against them? I think they’re the same men who stole several silver heirlooms from the Turner sisters.”

Sid and his companions winced, but did not speak.

“I see,” said the trooper. “Well, I guess there’s no need for you to go to headquarters now,” the officer admitted. “I’ll take your address, and if your testimony should be required, I’ll get in touch with you.”

When Nancy showed her driver’s license as identification, the policeman glanced at her with new interest. Taking her aside, he said, “So you’re the daughter of Carson Drew! I see you’re following in his footsteps. Starting rather young, aren’t you?”

Nancy laughed. “It was only by accident that I arrived at the Topham

bungalow at the critical moment," she protested modestly.

"Not many girls would have used their wits the way you did," the officer observed. "Unless I'm mistaken, these fellows are old hands at this game. They're no doubt the men who have been stealing various things from around Moon Lake for a number of seasons. The residents will be mighty grateful for what you've done. And that Mrs. Topham you spoke ofshe ought to give you a liberal reward for saving her household goods."

Nancy shook her head. "I don't want a reward, really I don't."

"Just the same you've earned one," insisted the officer, who said his name was Cowen. "If you'd like, I'll tell my chief the whole story and he'll take the matter up with this Mrs. Topham."

"You don't know her," Nancy remarked, "and I do. She'd never offer a reward. Even if she did, I wouldn't accept it." After a slight pause, she added, "In fact, I prefer that my name not be mentioned to her at all."

Officer Cowen shook his head in disbelief. "Well, all right, then. If you're sure you don't want any credit for capturing the thieves, I won't say anything. You're certain?"

"I am," Nancy replied firmly, "for a particular reason of my own."

The trooper smiled. "It must be a mighty good one."

"There is one favor you might do me," said Nancy. "Ask your chief to put in a good word for the caretaker, Jeff Tucker, to the Tophams. Perhaps then he won't lose his job."

"Be glad to," Officer Cowen promised. "And if you're really anxious not to figure in the case, I'll see if we can get along without your testimony."

Nancy thanked him, then suddenly thought of the old clock. At the moment it was lying on the front seat of her car, less than a dozen yards away. Should she reveal this information? She decided against doing so in front of the thieves, who,, though they could not hear what she had been saying, could see everything plainly. "I'll wait until a more opportune time," Nancy concluded.

It was agreed among the state policemen that one of them would stay to guard the van and keep a radio car standing by there. The other three troopers would take the captive thieves to headquarters.

The three prisoners, their faces sullen, were crowded into the car. One of the troopers took the wheel, while the one beside him kept the handcuffed trio closely covered.

Officer Cowen, a strapping, husky man, turned to Nancy. “I’ll ride with you,” he said. “You’re going past headquarters on the main road?”

“I’m on my way to River Heights,” she responded.

“Then the station is on your route. You can drop me off if you will.”

“Whywhy, of course,” Nancy stammered. “I’ll be glad to.”

At once she had thought of the Crowley clock. What if Officer Cowen should not accept her explanation as to why she had helped herself to the heirloom and its strange contents? If this happened, her progress in solving the mystery might receive a serious setback! Even as these disturbing ideas raced through her mind, the trooper started toward the blue convertible.

Nancy braced herself. “I’ll just have to ‘fess up,” she said to herself, “and take the consequences!”

CHAPTER XVII

Strange Instructions

FOR THE next few seconds Nancy's mind worked like lightning as she rehearsed what she would say to Officer Cowen. One idea stood out clearly: the police were concerned in the theft of the furniture, so she would hand over the clock. But they were not involved in locating Mr. Crowley's missing will. For this reason the young sleuth felt justified in keeping the notebook. She would turn it over to her father, and let him decide what disposition should be made of it.

"After all," Nancy told herself, "Dad is handling the Crowley case for the Hoovers, and even the Turners and Mrs. Rowen, in a way."

By this time she and the trooper had reached her car. "Would you like me to drive?" he asked.

"Whyeryes, if you wish," Nancy replied. "But first I want to show you something," she added, as he opened the door for her. "I have some stolen property here."

"What!"

Quickly Nancy explained that she had taken the responsibility of trying to learn whether or not the van held the stolen furniture. "I recognized a few of the pieces, and possibly this clock which the Tophams had told me about. I took that out to examine it. Then I never had a chance to get it back without being caught. I'm sure the Tophams will identify the old clock as their property."

Nancy's explanation seemed to satisfy the officer. "I'll take it to headquarters," he said. "Let's go!"

He laid the clock on the rear seat, then slid behind the wheel and drove off.

It was nearly midnight when Nancy, tired and worn from her long ride, reached the Drew home in River Heights. As she drove into the double garage, she noticed that her father's car was gone. A glance at the house disclosed that the windows were dark, with the exception of a light in the hall. Hannah Gruen must be in bed.

"Of course she's not expecting me," Nancy reasoned. "I wonder where

Dad can be? Oh, I hope he'll get home soon. I want to tell him about my discovery right away."

After locking the garage door, she went to the kitchen entrance and let herself in.

Her eyes lighted on the refrigerator and suddenly Nancy realized she was very hungry. Many hours had passed since she had eaten. "Urn, food!" she thought.

Just as Nancy opened the refrigerator door, she heard steps on the stairs and Hannah Gruen, wearing a sleepy look, appeared in robe and slippers.

"Nancy!" cried the housekeeper, instantly wide awake.

"Surprise, Hannah darling!" Nancy gave the housekeeper an affectionate hug and kiss. "I'm simply starved. Haven't had a bite since lunch-time."

"Why, you poor dear!" the housekeeper exclaimed in concern. "What happened? I'll fix you something right away."

As the two prepared a chicken sandwich, some cocoa, and Hannah cut a large slice of cinnamon cake over which she poured hot applesauce, Nancy told of her adventures.

The housekeeper's eyes widened. "Nancy, you might have been killed by those awful men. Well, I'm certainly glad they've been captured."

"So am I!" declared Nancy fervently as she finished the last crumb of cake. "And I hope the Turners get back their silver heirlooms."

"How about the Tophams?" Hannah Gruen questioned teasingly.

"Somehow," said Nancy with a wink, "that doesn't seem to worry me." Then she asked, "Where's Dad?"

"Working at his office," Hannah Gruen replied. "He phoned earlier that something unexpected had come up in connection with one of his cases."

"Then I'll wait for him," said Nancy. "You go back to bed. And thanks a million." The sleepy housekeeper did not demur.

Left alone, Nancy tidied the kitchen, then went to the living room.

“Now to find out what became of Josiah Crowley’s last will,” she thought excitedly, as she curled up in a comfortable chair near a reading lamp.

Carefully she thumbed the yellowed pages, for she was afraid they might tear. Evidently Josiah Crowley had used the same notebook for many years.

“He certainly knew how to save money,” she mused.

Nancy read page after page, perusing various kinds of memoranda and many notations of property owned by Mr. Crowley. There were also figures on numerous business transactions in which he had been involved. Nancy was surprised at the long list of stocks, bonds, and notes which apparently belonged to the estate.

“I had no idea Josiah Crowley was worth so much,” she murmured.

After a time Nancy grew impatient at the seemingly endless list of figures. She skipped several pages of the little notebook, and turned toward the end where Mr. Crowley had listed his possessions.

“Why, what’s this?” she asked herself. Fastened to one page was a very thin, flat key with a tag marked 148.

Suddenly a phrase on the opposite page, “My last will and testament,” caught and held Nancy’s attention. Eagerly she began to read the whole section.

“I’ve found it!” she exclaimed excitedly. “I’m glad I didn’t give up the search!”

The notation concerning the will was brief. Nancy assumed the cramped writing was Josiah Crowley’s. It read:

To whom it may concern: My last will and testament will be found in safe-deposit box number 148 in the Merchants Trust Company. The box is under the name of Josiah Johnston.

“And this is the key to the box!” Nancy told herself.

For several moments the young sleuth sat staring ahead of her. It seemed unbelievable that she had solved the mystery. But surely there

could no mistake. The date of the entry in the notebook was recent and the ink had not faded as it had on the earlier pages.

“There is a later will!” Nancy exclaimed aloud. “Oh, if only it leaves something to the Turners, and the Mathews, and Abby Rowen, and the Hoover girls! Then Allison could take voice lessons and little Judy would be taken care of, and”

Nancy hurriedly read on, hoping to learn something definite. But although she carefully examined every page in the book, there was no other mention of the will, nor any clue to its contents.

“No wonder the document didn’t come to light,” Nancy mused. “Who would have thought of looking for it in a safe-deposit box under the name of Josiah Johnston? In his desire for safekeeping, Josiah Crowley nearly defeated his own purpose.”

Her thoughts were interrupted as she heard a car turn into the driveway. Rushing to the window, Nancy saw her father pull into the garage. She ran to meet him at the kitchen door.

“Why, hello, Nancy,” he greeted her in surprise. “If I had known you were here, I’d have come home sooner. I was doing some special work on a case. Back from Moon Lake ahead of schedule, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Nancy admitted, trying to hide her excitement. “But for a good reason.”

Before her father could hang up his hat in the hall closet, she plunged into the story of her adventures and ended by showing him the notebook which she had found inside the mantel clock. When she had finished, Carson Drew stared at his daughter with mingled pride and amazement.

“You’re a good detective, Nancy. You’ve picked up an excellent clue,” he said.

“Dad, I thought it best not tell the police about the notebook. We don’t want to reveal the secret of another will to the executor mentioned in the old one.”

“You mean Mr. Topham. I agree,” the lawyer replied. “The new will may name someone else as executor.” He smiled. “I think you and I should try to see this will. But,” he added, “which Merchants Trust Company is it in? There must be dozens of banks by that name.”

Nancy suddenly snapped her fingers. “Dad, I believe I know. You recall that Judge Hart and his wife told me they had seen Josiah Crowley in Masonville a couple of times. And there’s a Merchants Trust Company there.”

Mr. Drew looked at his daughter admiringly. “I believe you have the answer, Nancy. And Judge Hart is just the man to help us. I’ll phone him in the morning. Well, I guess we both need some sleep.”

As the lawyer kissed his daughter good night, he added, “My dear, you were hi serious danger when you encountered those thieves. I don’t like to have you take such risks. I am very grateful indeed that you are back home safe.”

“The Tophams aren’t going to thank me when they find out what I have done,” Nancy said, as she went up the stairs ahead of her rather. “In fact, we may have a battle on our hands, Dad.”

“That’s right, Nancy. And it will be just as well that they don’t learn the details of how the will was found until the matter is settled beyond a doubt.”

“I’m certainly curious to find out if the new will left anything to the Tophams,” said Nancy.

“If not,” her father put in, “your discovery will strike them at an especially awkward time.”

Nancy paused on the stairs and turned to face her father. “What do you mean?”

“Well, there’s talk about town that Richard Topham has been losing heavily in the stock market this past month. He has been getting credit at a number of places on the strength of the inheritance, and I suspect he is depending on Crowley’s money to pull him through a tight spot. He’s making every effort to speed up the settlement of the estate.”

“Then we’d better hurry,” said Nancy, resuming the climb.

“Don’t build your hopes too high,” Mr. Drew advised her wisely. “There may be a slip, you know.”

“How?”

“We may fail to find the will in the safe-deposit box.”

“Oh, I can’t believe it, Dad. The notebook says it’s there!”

“Then,” the lawyer continued, “there is a chance that Josiah Crowley didn’t dispose of the fortune as the Turners and the Hoovers and others expected he would.”

“But he promised all those people”

“I know, Nancy. But there’s just the possibility that the notation in the notebook was wishful thinking and Mr. Crowley never got around to making the new will.”

“You can discourage me all you want to, Dad, “but I’m not going to stop hoping!” Nancy said. “Oh, I can scarcely wait for morning to come!”

Her father laughed. “You’re an incurable optimist! Now put Josiah Crowley out of your mind and get a good night’s sleep.”

At the door of her bedroom Nancy hesitated, then turned back toward the stairs.

“What’s up?” Mr. Drew asked.

Without answering Nancy ran down to the living room, picked up the notebook which lay on the table, and hurried back up the carpeted steps.

“After all I’ve gone through to get my hands on this,” she told her father, “I’m not going to take any chances!” Nancy laughed. “Tonight I’ll sleep with it under my pillow!”

CHAPTER XVIII

A Suspenseful Search

WHEN Nancy awoke the following morning, bright sunlight was streaming through her open bedroom window. As her eyes turned toward the clock on her dresser, she was alarmed to see that it was a little after nine o'clock.

"How could I have overslept on a morning like this?" she chided herself.

Quickly running her hand under the pillow, she brought out the Crowley notebook and surveyed it with satisfaction.

"What a surprise the Tophams are going to get!" she murmured softly.

After hastily bathing and dressing, Nancy hurried downstairs looking very attractive in a blue summer sweater suit. She kissed Hannah Gruen, who said a cheery good morning and told Nancy that Mr. Drew had already left for his office.

"Oh dear," Nancy said, "I wonder if he forgot our date?"

"No indeed," the housekeeper replied. "He phoned Judge Hart and expects word from him by ten o'clock. He'll let you know the result. My goodness, Nancy, you've really made a big discovery. I do hope everything turns out for the best."

She went into the kitchen but returned in a moment with a plate of crisp, golden waffles.

"Better eat your breakfast," she advised. "Your dad may call any minute."

Nancy ate a dish of strawberries, then started on the waffles. "These are yummy," she stated, pouring maple syrup over a second one.

She had just finished eating when the phone rang. Mr. Drew was calling to say Judge Hart had made arrangements at the bank. "Come to my office with the notebook and key, Nancy. We'll start from here."

"I'll be right down, Dad."

Nancy went upstairs for her purse, then drove to her father's office.

"I have the notebook with me," she told the lawyer. "Do you want it?"

"We'll take the book along. I want to show it to the head of the trust department at the bank," Mr. Drew said. "It's our proof we have good reason for taking a look in Mr. Crowley's box."

After leaving a number of instructions with his private secretary, Carson Drew followed his daughter from the office. He took his place beside her in the convertible.

"I'll never get over it if we don't find a newer will," Nancy declared, as they drove along. A flush of excitement had tinted her cheeks and her eyes were bright.

"You must remember one thing, Nancy," returned her father calmly. "Crowley was an odd person and did things in an odd way. A will may be there, and again it may not. Perhaps he only left further directions to finding it.

"I remember one case in Canada years ago. An eccentric Frenchman died and left directions to look in a trunk of old clothes for a will. In the pocket of a coat were found further instructions to look in a closet of his home. There his family found a note telling them to look in a copper boiler.

"The boiler had disappeared but was finally located in a curiosity shop. Inside, pasted on the bottom, was what proved to be a word puzzle in Chinese. The old Frenchman's heirs were about to give up in despair when a Chinese solved the puzzle and the old man's fortune was founda bag of gold under a board in his bedroom floor!"

"At least they found it," said Nancy.

The trip to Masonville was quickly accomplished, and Nancy parked the car in front of the Merchants Trust Company.

Father and daughter alighted and entered the bank. Mr. Drew gave his name and asked to see the president After a few minutes' wait they were ushered into a private conference room. An elderly man, Mr. Jensen, arose to greet them.

The introductions over, Mr. Drew hastened to state his mission. Before he could finish the story, the bank president broke in.

“Judge Hart has told me the story. I’ll call Mr. Warren, our trust officer.”

He picked up his desk phone and in a few minutes Mr. Warren appeared and was introduced. Nancy now brought out the notebook, opened it to the important page, and handed it to the men to read.

When they finished, Mr. Jensen said, “What a mystery!”

Mr. Warren pulled from his pocket the file card which the owner of Box 148 had filled out in the name of Josiah Johnston. The two samples of cramped handwritings were compared.

“I would say,” Mr. Drew spoke up, “that there is no doubt but that Crowley and Johnston were the same person.”

“I agree,” asserted Mr. Jensen, and his trust officer nodded.

“Then there’s no reason why we shouldn’t open the box?” Mr. Drew asked.

“None,” Mr. Warren replied. “Of course nothing may be removed, you understand.”

“All I want to see,” Nancy spoke up, “is whether there is a will in the box, the date on it, who the executor is, and who the heirs are.”

The bankers smiled and Mr. Jensen said, “You’re hoping to solve four mysteries all at once! Well, let’s get started.”

With Mr. Warren in the lead, the four walked toward the rear of the bank to the vault of the trust department. A guard opened the door and they went through. Mr. Jensen took the key from Mr. Crowley’s notebook, while Mr. Warren opened the first part oŁ the double safety lock with the bank key. Then he inserted the key from the notebook. It fitted!

In a moment he lifted out Deposit Box Number 148. It was a small one and not heavy, he said.

“We’ll take this into a private room,” Mr. Jensen stated. He, Nancy, and Mr. Drew followed the trust officer down a corridor of cubbyhole rooms until they reached one not in use.

“Now,” said Mr. Jensen, when the door was closed behind them, “we shall see how manyif anyof the mysteries are solved.”

Nancy held her breath as he raised the lid of the box. All peered inside. The box was empty, except for one bulky document in the bottom.

“Oh, it must be the will!” Nancy exclaimed.

“It is a will,” Mr. Jensen announced, after a hasty glance at the first page. “Josiah Crowley’s last will and testament.”

“When was it written?” Nancy asked quickly.

“In March of this year,” Mr. Jensen told her.

“Oh, Dad,” Nancy cried, “this was later than the will the Tophams submitted for probate!”

“That’s right.”

“Let’s read it right away,” Nancy begged.

Mr. Jensen handed the sheets to Mr. Drew. “Maybe you can decipher this. The handwriting is too much for me.”

The lawyer took the will. Then, as Nancy looked over his shoulder, he haltingly read aloud, giving an interpretation rather than a word by word account.

“Mr. JensenMr. Warren, your bank has been named as executor,” he said.

“Very good.” The president smiled. “But I expect Mr. Topham won’t be happy to hear this.”

Mr. Drew had turned to the last page. “The signature of Josiah is in order,” he remarked, “and there are two witnessesDr. Nesbitt and Thomas Wackley. No wonder this will didn’t come to light. Both those men died in April.”

As Nancy tried to decipher the handwriting, she noticed to her delight that the Hoover girls and Abby Rowen were mentioned.

At this moment the president said, “Mr. Drew, the bank’s regular lawyer had just left for Europe on an extended vacation. Since you and your daughter have solved the mystery and are so vitally interested in it, would you handle this case for us?”

Nancy’s eyes sparkled and Mr. Drew smiled. “I’d certainly be very glad

to," he said.

"What instructions have you for us?" Mr. Warren asked.

Mr. Drew thought a moment, then said, "Because of the unusual aspects of this case, I believe that first of all I'd like you to have photostats of the will made, so I can study the contents carefully."

"We'll be happy to do that," Mr. Jensen replied. "And then?"

"After I'm sure everything is legal," Mr. Drew went on, "I'll deliver the original will for probate and notify the people who will benefit from Mr. Crowley's estate."

"Fine," said Mr. Jensen. "We have photostating equipment right here. I'll have a couple of copies made while you wait. Or shall I send them to your office?"

Mr. Drew glanced at his daughter. "We'll wait," he said, smiling.

While the photostats were being made, Nancy's mind was racing. "Oh, I hope Allison receives enough money to pay for singing lessons, and the other deserving people get nice amounts," she whispered to her father, who nodded.

The wait seemed interminable to Nancy, who could not sit still. She walked back and forth until finally her father remarked teasingly, "You're like a caged lion."

Nancy pretended to pout. "At least I'm not growling," she said, and Mr. Drew grinned.

Soon a messenger brought back the will, together with two photostats of the document

"Thank you," said Mr. Jensen, who handed the photostatic copies to Mr. Drew.

"I'll work on this at once," the lawyer promised as he put the papers in his brief case. Then he and his daughter left the bank.

Mr. Drew insisted that he and Nancy stop for lunch and refused to let her look at the will while they were waiting to be served. "Relax, young lady," he warned. "There's no point in letting any prying eyes know our secret."

As he saw his daughter's animation fading, Mr. Drew said, "Suppose

you come to my office with me and we'll work on the problem together. I'll have the will typed. In this way its full meaning can be understood more easily."

"Oh, thanks, Dad," said Nancy.

In the lawyer's office the young sleuth sat down beside his typist, Miss Lamby. As each page came from the machine, Nancy read it avidly.

"Mr. Crowley certainly seemed to know the correct phraseology for drawing up a will," she remarked.

Finally, when the typing had been completed, Nancy said to the secretary, "I have a lot of questions to ask Dad."

Miss Lamby smiled. "If they're legal ones, he'll know all the answers," she said. "There's no better lawyer in River Heights than your father."

Nancy smiled as she dashed into her father's office. The two Drews sat down to study Josiah Crowley's last will and testament.

"If this does prove to be legal," said Nancy, "it will certainly be a blow to the Tophams."

"I'm afraid so."

"Dad, when you call a meeting of all the relatives and read the will aloud," Nancy said, "please may I be there?"

Mr. Drew laughed. "I'll humor you this time, Nancy. You may be present when the Tophams get the surprise of their lives!"

CHAPTER XIX

Startling Revelations

"DAD, it's nearly two o'clock now. Mr. Crowley's relatives should be here in a few minutes! I'm so excited!"

Carson Drew, who stood in the living room of the Drew home with Mr. Warren from the bank, smiled at his daughter as she fluttered about, arranging chairs.

"I believe you're more thrilled than if you were inheriting the fortune yourself," he remarked.

"I am thrilled," Nancy admitted. "I can scarcely wait until the will is read aloud. Won't everyone be surprised? Especially the Tophams. Do you think they will come?"

"Oh, yes, the Tophams will be here. And, unless I am mistaken, they will bring a lawyer with them. Just as soon as they learned that another will had come to light, they began to worry. They will certainly want to hear what is in this one."

"Are you certain the will we found can't be broken?" Nancy inquired anxiously.

"Of course I can't be certain, Nancy. But I have gone over it carefully, and so far as I can tell, it is technically perfect. I also asked a couple of lawyer friends and they agree. Josiah Crowley was peculiar in some ways, but he was a very smart man. I'll promise you the Tophams will have a difficult time if they try to contest this will."

"The bank will help you fight," Mr. Warren put in.

With the exception of Abby Rowen, who was still confined to bed, all the old gentleman's relatives had promised to be present. Grace and Allison Hoover, although not relatives, had also been invited.

"It's too bad Mrs. Rowen can't come," said Nancy. "But I'll take the news to her this very afternoon."

"The size of the fortune will probably be a great surprise to everyone but the Tophams," said her father with a smile. "Nancy, you did a remarkable piece of detective work."

“It was fun,” she said modestly. “And I can hardly wait to have it all cleared up.”

“We may have some trying minutes with the Tophams, Nancy,” her father warned.

“Yes, I suppose so. I expect anybody would be sorry to see a fortune slip away… . Dad, I see Grace and Allison coming up the walk now,” Nancy announced, glancing out the window.

She greeted them with kisses and escorted the sisters into the living room, where she introduced them to Mr. Warren. As Allison sat down, she whispered to Nancy:

“Is it true a later will has been found?”

“You and Grace have no cause to worry,” Nancy assured her with a mysterious smile.

The doorbell rang. This time Nancy admitted Edna and Mary Turner, who were dressed as if for a party. With them was little Judy, who threw herself into Nancy’s arms. A few minutes later the Mathews brothers, William and Fred, arrived.

“I guess everyone is here except the Tophams,” Mr. Drew commented. “We had better wait for them a few minutes.”

There was no need to wait, for at that moment the bell rang sharply. Nancy opened the door and the four members of the Topham family walked in haughtily, merely nodding to the others in the room. As Mr. Drew had predicted, they were accompanied by a lawyer.

“Why have we been called here?” Mrs. Topham demanded, addressing Mr. Drew. “Have you the audacity to claim that another will has been found?”

“I have a will written only this past March, Mrs. Topham,” Carson Drew replied evenly. “And I’d like to introduce to all of you Mr. John Warren, trust officer of the Merchants Trust Company, of Masonville, which has been named as executor.”

“It’s preposterous!” Mrs. Topham stormed. “Josiah Crowley made only one will and in that he left everything to us with my husband as executor.”

“It looks like a conspiracy to me,” Ada added tartly, as she gazed

coldly upon the relatives and friends who were seated about the room.

Isabel did not speak, but tossed her head contemptuously. Richard Topham likewise did not offer a comment, but uneasily seated himself beside his own attorney.

“If you will please be seated, Mrs. Topham, I will read the will,” Mr. Drew suggested.

Reluctantly Mrs. Topham sat down.

“As I have said,” Mr. Drew began, “a recent will of the late Josiah Crowley was found in a safe-deposit box in the Masonville bank. The will is unusually long, and with your permission I will read from a typed copy only the portions which have to do with the disposal of the property. But first I want to ask Mr. Topham what value he puts on the estate.”

“A hundred thousand after taxes,” the man replied.

“Oh!” the Turners exclaimed, and Mary said, “I had no idea Josiah had that much money.”

“Nor I,” Edna agreed.

Mr. Drew picked up several typewritten sheets from the table, and began to read in a clear voice:

” ‘I, Josiah Crowley, do make this my last will and testament, hereby revoking all former wills by me at any time made. I give and bequeath all my property, real and personal, as follows:

” ‘To my beloved friends and neighbors, Grace and Allison Hoover, a sum equal to twenty per cent of my estate, share and share alike.’ “

“I must be dreaming!” Grace gasped.

“You mean I’m going to get ten thousand dollars?” Allison cried out. She burst into tears. “Oh, Nancy, you did this for me! Now I can have my voice lessons.”

Isabel Topham eyed her disdainfully. “It would take more than ten thousand dollars to make a singer out of you!” she said maliciously.

“Quiet!” commanded her father. “Let’s hear what else this will says.”

His daughter subsided, but his wife exclaimed spitefully, “The will is a

fraud. The Hoovers aren't even relatives."

"It is no fraud," Mr. Drew told her quietly. Again he picked up the will and began to read:

" 'To Abby Rowen, my late wife's cousin, in consideration of her kindness to me, a sum equal to ten per cent of my estate.' "

"Oh, I'm so glad," Grace murmured. "Now she'll be able to get the medical and other attention she needs."

"And have someone live at her house to take care of her," said Nancy.

"That old lady gets ten thousand dollars?" Ada Topham said harshly. "What did she ever do for Cousin Josiah?" Angrily she turned to her mother. "We took care of him for yearsshe didn't!"

"I'll say not," Isabel echoed, her voice tart.

" 'To my cousins, Fred and William Mathews, a sum equal to twenty per cent of my estate, share and share alike,' " Mr. Drew read.

"We didn't expect that much," Fred Mathews declared in genuine surprise. "Josiah was very kind." Fred smiled. "Now we can take a trip like we've always wanted to do, William."

"That's right. I just can't believe it. A long trip on an ocean liner or a plane."

" 'To my cousins, Edna and Mary Turner, twenty per cent of my estate, share and share alike.' "

"Oh, how generous!" Edna murmured. "Now little Judy can have the things we've always wanted to give her."

"Yes," said Mary Turner. "Oh, I feel so relieved."

"Aren't we mentioned at all?" Mrs. Topham broke in sharply.

Mr. Drew smiled. "Yes, you are mentioned. I'm coming to that now. 'To Richard Topham, five thousand dollars. To Grace and Allison Hoover' "

"Hold on!" cried Mrs. Topham. "What about me and the girls?"

"No money was left to you," the lawyer stated simply.

Isabel gave a shriek. “Oh, no! Oh, no! Oh, Mother, all those bills! What’ll we do?”

Ada too had cried out. “I’ll have to go to work! Oh, I can’t bear the thought of it!”

When the furor died down, Mr. Drew read on, ” ‘To Grace and Allison Hoover my household furniture now in the possession of Mrs. Richard Topham.’ “

There was a gasp of surprise from everyone in the room, and Mrs. Topham half arose from her chair. It was generally known in River Heights that she had practically confiscated Josiah Crowley’s furniture at the time he had been induced to make his home with the Tophams.

“How insulting!” the woman cried. “Does Josiah Crowley dare hint that I took his furniture?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what was in his mind at the time he wrote the will,” Mr. Drew told her with a smile.

Grace Hoover interposed quickly, “We have enough furniture without Josiah Crowley’s.”

Allison nodded. “We’ll not take any of it from you, Mrs. Topham.”

Mr. Drew carefully folded the document he had been reading, and after placing it in his pocket, he said to the people in the room:

“That is all, except that there is a proviso for the executor to pay all Mr. Crowley’s just debts, including his funeral expenses, and that what balance is left in the estate goes to the Manningham Old Men’s Home. I understand Josiah Crowley kept his assets in a liquid state. It will not be difficult to convert the estate into cash. For that reason I should think it would be possible to draw on your inheritances at once.”

Ada wheeled upon Nancy, her face convulsed with anger. “You engineered this whole thing, Nancy Drew!” she accused bitterly.

“Any good I’ve done I’m happy about,” Nancy answered.

“We’ll break the will!” Mrs. Topham announced firmly.

CHAPTER XX

A Happy Finale

"OF COURSE you may take the matter into court if you like," Mr. Drew responded to Mrs. Topham's threat. "But I warn you it will be a waste of your time and money. If you don't wish to accept my judgment, ask your own lawyer."

"Mr. Drew is right," the other lawyer said, after arising and looking carefully at the legal document which Mr. Drew took from his pocket.

"Oh, he is, is he?" Mrs. Topham retorted. "If that's all you know about law, you're discharged! We'll get another lawyer and we'll fight to the last ditch!"

With that she arose and stalked from the room. Isabel and Ada followed, after bestowing a withering glance upon Nancy. Mr. Topham brought up the rear. As soon as the door had closed behind them, their lawyer arose and picked up his brief case.

"Well, I can't say I'm sorry to be taken off the case," he remarked as he, too, took his leave. "But I advise you to be on your guard. That woman is certainly belligerent."

At once the atmosphere in the Drew living room became less strained, though each person was fearful Mrs. Topham would make trouble. Everyone began to talk at once.

"Oh, Nancy, I can hardly believe it yet!" Allison declared happily. "The money means so much to Grace and me! And we owe it all to you, Nancy Drew! You haven't told us how you came to find the will, but I know you were responsible."

When the Hoover girls and Mr. Crowley's relatives begged her for the details, Nancy told of her adventure with the thieves at Moon Lake. After she had finished the story, they praised her highly for what she had done.

"We'll never be able to thank you enough," Grace said quietly. "But after the estate has been settled, we'll try to show our appreciation."

It was on the tip of Nancy's tongue to say that she did not want a reward, when Mr. Drew turned the conversation into a different

channel.

“Mrs. Topham will not give up the money without a fight,” he warned. “My advice would be to go along as you have until the court has decided to accept this will as the final one. However, if Mrs. Topham and her daughters bring the matter into court, I’ll give them a battle they’ll never forget!”

After thanking Mr. Drew and Nancy for everything they had done, the relatives and friends departed. Allison and Grace were the last to leave. On the porch, Allison paused to hug Nancy and say, “Please let us know what develops. I’m so eager to start taking voice lessons.”

Nancy wanted to set off at once to see Abby Rowen and tell her the good news. But upon second thought she decided to wait. Suppose the Tophams succeeded in upsetting the whole easel

For a week Nancy waited impatiently to hear the result of the battle over the will. As she and her father had anticipated, Mrs. Topham was fighting bitterly for the Crowley estate. She had put forth the claim that the will Nancy had unearthed was a forged document.

“This suspense is just awful,” Nancy told her father one morning. “When are we going to get final word?”

“I can’t answer that, Nancy. But apparently Mr. Topham thinks it’s a losing battle. I suppose you’ve heard about the family.”

“Why, no, what about them?”

“They’re practically bankrupt. Richard Topham has been losing steadily on the stock market of late. After his failure to recover the Crowley fortune, the banks reduced his credit. He’s been forced to give up his beautiful home.”

“No, really? How that must hurt Mrs. Topham and the two girls!”

“Yes, it’s undoubtedly a bitter pill to swallow. They are moving into a small house this week, and from now on they’ll have to give up their extravagant way of living. Both girls are working. Personally, I think it will be good for them.”

Word came that the three furniture thieves had finally confessed to many robberies and their unsold loot was recovered. Among the pieces were all the heirlooms they had stolen from the Turners.

One evening Mr. Drew came home wearing a broad smile. Facing Nancy and laying both hands on her shoulders, he said:

"We've won, my dear. The will you located has been accepted as the last one Mr. Crowley wrote."

"Oh, Dad, how wonderful!" she cried, whirling her father about in a little dance. "First thing tomorrow morning, may I go and tell Allison and Grace and the others?"

"I think that would be a fine idea. Of course the bank and I will formally notify them later."

The following morning Nancy was the first one downstairs and started breakfast before Hannah Gruen appeared.

"My goodness, you're an early bird, Nancy," the housekeeper said with a smile. "Big day, eh?"

"Very big," Nancy replied.

As soon as the family had eaten, Hannah said, "Never mind helping me today. You run along and make those people happy as soon as possible."

"Oh, thank you, Hannah. I'll leave right away."

Nancy, dressed in a simple green linen sports dress with a matching sweater, kissed her little family good-by and drove off. Her first stop was at the Mathews brothers. They greeted her affably, then waited for Nancy to speak.

"I have good news," she said, her eyes dancing. "Mrs. Topham lost her case. The will Dad and I found has been accepted for probate. You will receive the inheritance Mr. Crowley left you!"

"Praise be!" Fred cried. "And we never would have received it if it hadn't been for you." His brother nodded in agreement.

To cover her embarrassment at their praise, Nancy reached into a pocket and pulled out a handful of travel folders and airline schedules. "I thought you might like to look at these. Now I must hurry off and tell the other heirs."

As she drove away, the two men smiled, waved, then immediately began to look at the folders. "I hope they have a grand trip," Nancy

thought.

Half an hour later she pulled into the driveway of the Turner home. Before the car stopped, Judy came racing from the front door. As Nancy stepped out, the little girl threw herself into the young sleuth's arms. "Nancy, guess what! My aunties found an old, old doll that belonged to my mommy and they gave it to me. Come and see her. She's pretty as can be."

Judy pulled Nancy by the hand up the steps and into the house. "There she is," the child said proudly, pointing to a blond, curly-haired doll seated in a tiny rocking chair.

"Why, she's darling," Nancy commented. "And, Judy, she looks like you, dimples and all."

Judy nodded. "And Aunt Mary says she looks like my mommy did when she was a little girl, so I'm always going to take very good care of my dolly."

At this moment her great-aunts came from the rear of the house to greet their caller.

"I see," said Nancy, "that you have made Judy very happy. Now it's my turn to pass along good news to you," and she told about their inheritance.

The women smiled happily and tears came to their eyes. Then suddenly Edna Turner gave Nancy an impulsive hug. "You dear, dear girl!" she half sobbed with joy. "Now Judy will always be well taken care of and receive the kind of.schooling we think she should have!"

Mary kissed Nancy and thanked the young sleuth for her untiring efforts to see justice done. Judy, meanwhile, looked on in puzzlement at the scene. But sensing that it called for her participation, she grabbed up her new doll and began to dance around with it.

"Now you can go to school too, Carol," she told her doll.

It was hard for Nancy to break away from the Turners, but she reminded them that she still had two calls to make.

"But come back soon," Judy said.

"When Nancy arrived at Abby Rowen's she was delighted to find her seated by the window in a chair. Her kind neighbor, Mrs. Jones, was

there preparing food for the invalid. To this Nancy added a jar of homemade beef broth and a casserole of rice and chicken which Hannah Gruen had insisted upon sending.

“Can you stay a little while?” Mrs. Jones asked. “I ought to run home for half an hour, then I’ll come back.”

“She’s been so kind,” Abby Rowen spoke up. “Today she took my laundry home to wash and iron.” After the woman had left, Abby went on, “The folks around here have been very thoughtful of me, but I just can’t impose on them any longer. Yet I haven’t any money”

Nancy took the invalid’s hand in hers and smiled. “I came to tell you that now you have lots of money, left to you by Josiah Crowley.”

“What! You mean I won’t have to depend on just my little pension any longer? Bless Josiah! Nancy, I never could believe that my cousin would go back on his word.”

Nancy ate some broth and crackers with Abby Rowen and told the whole story. The old woman’s eyes began to sparkle and color came into her cheeks. “Oh, this is so wonderful!” she said. Then she chuckled. “It does my heart good to know you outwitted those uppity Topham women!”

Nancy grinned, then said soberly, “If I hadn’t become involved in this mystery, I might never have met several wonderful peopleand their names aren’t Topham!”

Abby Rowen laughed aloudthe first time Nancy had heard her do this. She laughed again just as the neighbor returned. Mrs. Jones, amazed, had no chance to exclaim over the elderly woman’s high spirits. Abby launched into an account of her inheritance.

As soon as Mrs. Rowen finished the story, Nancy said good-by and left. She now headed straight for the Hoover farm. The two sisters were working in a flower bed.

“Hi!” Nancy called.

“Hi, yourself. How’s everything?” Allison asked, as she brushed some dirt off her hands and came forward with Grace.

“Hurry and change your clothes,” Nancy said. “I have a surprise for you.”

“You mean we’re going somewhere?” Grace inquired.

“That’s right. To Signor Mascagni’s so Allison can sign up for lessons.”

“Oh, Nancy, you mean?”

“Yes. The inheritance is yours!”

“I can’t believe it! I can’t believe it!” Allison cried out ecstatically. She grabbed the other two girls and whirled them around.

“It’s simply marvelous,” said Grace. “Marvelous. Oh, Nancy, you and Mr. Crowley are just the dearest friends we’ve ever had.” Then, seeing Nancy’s deep blush, she added, “Come on, Allison. Let’s get dressed.”

Nancy waited in the garden. Fifteen minutes later the sisters were ready to leave for River Heights. “But before we go,” said Grace, “Allison and I want to give you somethingit’s sort of a reward.”

“Something very special,” her sister broke in.

“Oh, I don’t want any reward,” Nancy objected quickly.

“Please take this one,” Allison spoke up.

She led the way to the living-room mantel. There stood the Crowley clock. “We received it this morning from the Tophams,” Grace explained.

Allison added, “We think you earned this heirloom, Nancy, and somehow Grace and I feel Mr. Crowley would want you to have it.”

“Why, thank you,” said Nancy.

She was thrilled, and gazed meditatively at the old clock. Though quaint, it was not handsome, she thought. But for her it certainly held a special significance. She was too modest to explain to Allison and Grace why she would prize the heirloom, and besides, her feeling was something she could not put into words. Actually she had become attached to the clock because of its association with her recent adventure.

“This is the first mystery I’ve solved alone,” she thought. “I wonder if I’ll ever have another one half so thrilling.”

As Nancy stood looking wistfully at the old clock she little dreamed that in the near future she would be involved in The Hidden Staircase

mystery, a far more baffling case than the one she had just solved. But somehow, as Nancy gazed at the timepiece, she sensed that exciting days were soon to come.

Nancy ceased daydreaming as the clock was handed to her and looked at the Hoover girls. “I’ll always prize this clock as a trophy of my first Venture as a detective,” she said with a broad smile.

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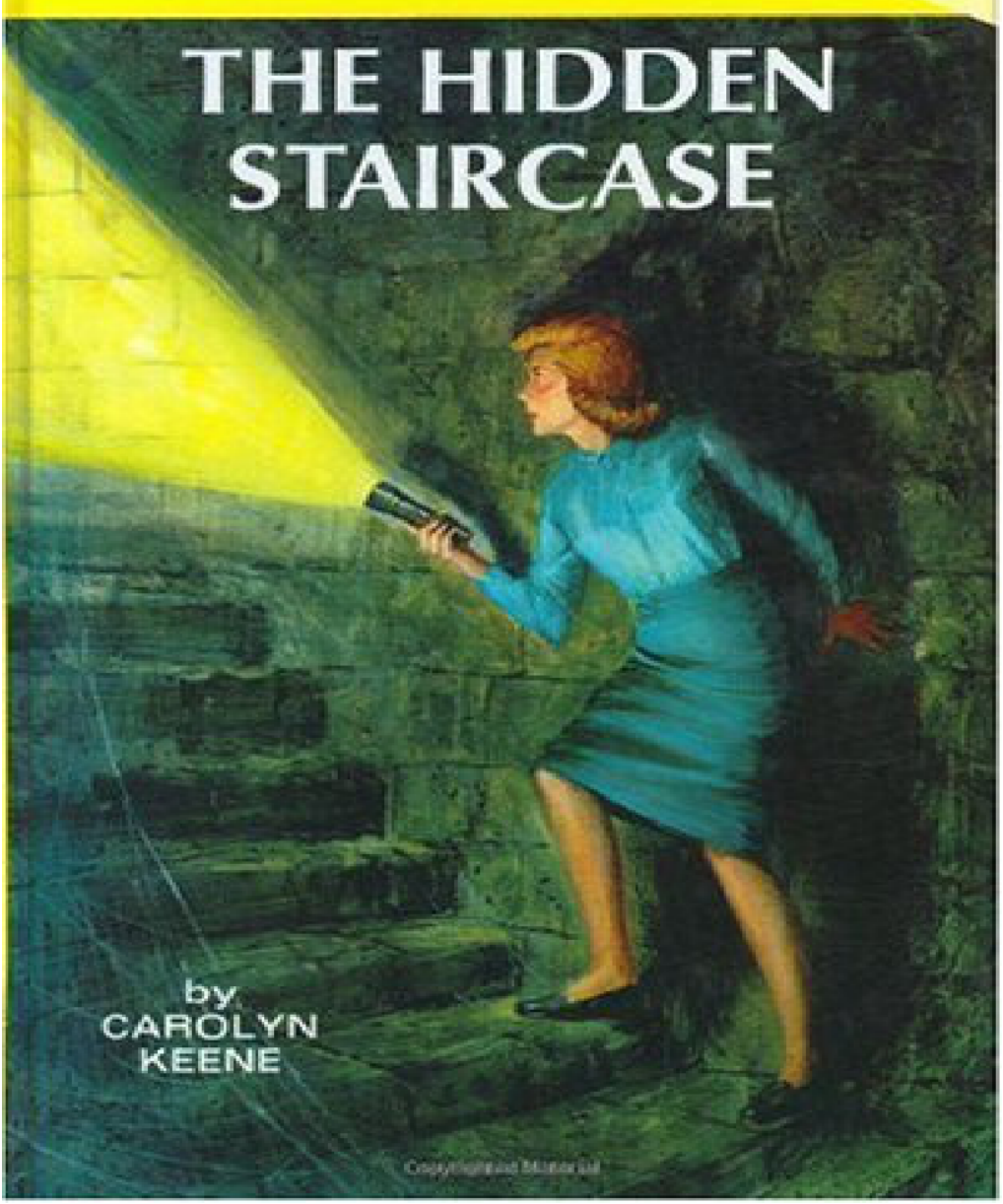
NANCY DREW MYSTERY STORIES 2

THE HIDDEN STAIRCASE



by CAROLYN KEENE

Carolyn Keene

THE HIDDEN STAIRCASE

Nancy Drew Mystery

CHAPTER I

The Haunted House

NANCY DREW began peeling off her garden gloves as she ran up the porch steps and into the hall to answer the ringing telephone. She picked it up and said, “Hello!”

“Hi, Nancy! This is Helen.” Although Helen Corning was nearly three years older than Nancy, the two girls were close friends.

“Are you tied up on a case?” Helen asked.

“No. What’s up? A mystery?”

“Yesa haunted house.”

Nancy sat down on the chair by the telephone. “Tell me more!” the eighteen-year-old detective begged excitedly.

“You’ve heard me speak of my Aunt Rosemary,” Helen began. “Since becoming a widow, she has lived with her mother at Twin Elms, the old family mansion out in Cliffwood. Well, I went to see them yesterday. They said that many strange, mysterious things have been happening there recently. I told them how good you are at solving mysteries, and they’d like you to come out to Twin Elms and help them.” Helen paused, out of breath.

“It certainly sounds intriguing,” Nancy replied, her eyes dancing.

“If you’re not busy, Aunt Rosemary and I would like to come over in about an hour and talk to you about the ghost.”

“I can’t wait.”

After Nancy had put down the phone, she sat lost in thought for several minutes. Since solving The Secret of the Old Clock, she had longed for another case. Here was her chance!

Attractive, blond-haired Nancy was brought out of her daydreaming by the sound of the doorbell. At the same moment the Drews’ housekeeper, Hannah Gruen, came down the front stairs.

“I’ll answer it,” she offered.

Mrs. Gruen had lived with the Drews since Nancy was three years old. At that time Mrs. Drew had passed away and Hannah had become like a second mother to Nancy. There was a deep affection between the two, and Nancy confided all her secrets to the understanding housekeeper.

Mrs. Gruen opened the door and instantly a man stepped into the hall. He was short, thin, and rather stooped. Nancy guessed his age to be about forty.

“Is Mr. Drew at home?” he asked brusquely. “My name is Comber Nathan Comber.”

“No, he’s not here just now,” the housekeeper replied.

The caller looked over Hannah Gruen’s shoulder and stared at Nancy. “Are you Nancy Drew?”

“Yes, I am. Is there anything I can do for you?”

The man’s shifty gaze moved from Nancy to Hannah. “I’ve come out of the goodness of my heart to warn you and your father,” he said pompously.

“Warn us? About what?” Nancy asked quickly.

Nathan Comber straightened up importantly and said, “Your father is in great danger, Miss. Drew!”

Both Nancy and Hannah Gruen gasped. You mean this very minute?” the housekeeper questioned.

“All the time,” was the startling answer. “I understand you’re a pretty bright girl, Miss Drewthat you even solve mysteries. Well, right now I advise you to stick close to your father. Don’t leave him for a minute.”

Hannah Gruen looked as if she were ready to collapse and suggested that they all go into the living room, sit down, and talk the matter over. When they were seated, Nancy asked Nathan Gomber to explain further.

“The story in a nutshell is this,” he began. “You know that your father was brought in to do legal work for the railroad when it was buying property for the new bridge here.”

As Nancy nodded, he continued, “Well, a lot of the folks who sold

their property think they were gypped."

Nancy's face reddened. "I understood from my father that everyone was well paid."

"That's not true," said Comber. "Besides, the railroad is in a real mess now. One of the property owners, whose deed and signature they claim to have, says that he never signed the contract of sale."

"What's his name?" Nancy asked.

"Willie Wharton."

Nancy had not heard her father mention this name. She asked Gomber to go on with his story.

"I'm acting as agent for Willie Wharton and several of the land owners who were his neighbors," he said, "and they can make it pretty tough for the railroad. Willie Wharton's signature was never witnessed and the attached certificate of acknowledgment was not notarized. That's good proof the signature was a forgery. Well, if the railroad thinks they're going to get away with this, they're not!"

Nancy frowned. Such a procedure on the part of the property owners meant trouble for her father! She said evenly, "But all Willie Wharton has to do is swear before a notary that he did sign the contract of sale."

Comber chuckled. "It's not that easy, Miss Drew. Willie Wharton is not available. Some of us have a good idea where he is and we'll produce him at the right time. But that time won't be until the railroad promises to give the sellers more money. Then he'll sign. You see, Willie is a real kind man and he wants to help his friends out whenever he can. Now he's got a chance."

Nancy had taken an instant dislike to Comber and now it was quadrupled. She judged him to be the kind of person who stays within the boundaries of the law but whose ethics are questionable. This was indeed a tough problem for Mr. Drew!

"Who are the people who are apt to harm my father?" she asked.

"I'm not saying who they are," Nathan Comber retorted. "You don't seem very appreciative of my coming here to warn you. Fine kind of a daughter you are. You don't care what happens to your father!"

Annoyed by the man's insolence, both Nancy and Mrs. Gruen angrily stood up. The housekeeper, pointing toward the front door, said, "Good day, Mr. Gomber!"

The caller shrugged as he too arose. "Have it your own way, but don't say I didn't warn you!"

He walked to the front door, opened it, and as he went outside, closed it with a tremendous bang.

"Well, of all the insulting people!" Hannah snorted.

Nancy nodded. "But that's not the worst of it, Hannah darling. I think there's more to Comber's warning than he is telling. It seems to me to imply a threat. And he almost has me convinced. Maybe I should stay close to Dad until he and the other lawyers have straightened out this railroad tangle."

She said this would mean giving up a case she had been asked to take. Hastily Nancy gave Hannah the highlights of her conversation with Helen about the haunted mansion. "Helen and her aunt will be here in a little while to tell us the whole story."

"Oh, maybe things aren't so serious for your father as that horrible man made out," Hannah said encouragingly. "If I were you I'd listen to the details about the haunted house and then decide what you want to do about the mystery."

In a short time a sports car pulled into the winding, tree-shaded driveway of the Drew home. The large brick house was set some distance back from the street.

Helen was at the wheel and stopped just beyond the front entrance. She helped her aunt from the car and they came up the steps together. Mrs. Rosemary Hayes was tall and slender and had graying hair. Her face had a gentle expression but she looked tired.

Helen introduced her aunt to Nancy and to Hannah, and the group went into the living room to sit down. Hannah offered to prepare tea and left the room.

"Oh, Nancy!' said Helen, "I do hope you can take Aunt Rosemary and Miss Flora's case." Quickly she explained that Miss Flora was her aunt's mother. "Aunt Rosemary is really my great-aunt and Miss Flora is my great-grandmother. From the time she was a little girl everybody has called her Miss Flora."

“The name may seem odd to people the first time they hear it,” Mrs. Hayes remarked, “but we’re all so used to it, we never think anything about it.”

“Please tell me more about your house,” Nancy requested, smiling.

“Mother and I are almost nervous wrecks,” Mrs. Hayes replied. “I have urged her to leave Twin Elms, but she won’t. You see, Mother has lived there ever since she married my father, Everett Turnbull.”

Mrs. Hayes went on to say that all kinds of strange happenings had occurred during the past couple of weeks. They had heard untraceable music, thumps and creaking noises at night, and had seen eerie, indescribable shadows on walls.

“Have you notified the police?” Nancy asked.

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Hayes answered. “But after talking with my mother, they came to the conclusion that most of what she saw and heard could be explained by natural causes. The rest, they said, probably was imagination on her part. You see, she’s over eighty years old, and while I know her mind is sound and alert, I’m afraid that the police don’t think so.”

After a pause Mrs. Hayes went on, “I had almost talked myself into thinking the ghostly noises could be attributed to natural causes, when something else happened.”

“What was that?” Nancy questioned eagerly.

“We were robbed! During the night several pieces of old jewelry were taken. I did telephone the police about this and they came to the house for a description of the pieces. But they still would not admit that a ghost1y visitor had taken them.”

Nancy was thoughtful for several seconds before making a comment. Then she said, “Do the police have any idea who the thief might be?”

Aunt Rosemary shook her head. “No. And I’m afraid we might have more burglaries.”

Many ideas were running through Nancy’s head. One was that the thief apparently had no intention of harming anyonethat his only motive had been burglary. Was he or was he not the person who was “haunting” the house? Or could the strange happenings have some natural explanations, as the police had suggested?

At this moment Hannah returned with a large silver tray on which was a tea service and some dainty sandwiches. She set the tray on a table and asked Nancy to pour the tea. She herself passed the cups of tea and sandwiches to the callers.

As they ate, Helen said, “Aunt Rosemary hasn’t told you half the things that have happened. Once Miss Flora thought she saw someone sliding out of a fireplace at midnight, and another time a chair moved from one side of the room to the other while her back was turned. But no one was there!”

“How extraordinary!” Hannah Gruen exclaimed. “I’ve often read about such things, but I never thought I’d meet anyone who lived in a haunted house.”

Helen turned to Nancy and gazed pleadingly at her friend. “You see how much you’re needed at Twin Elms? Won’t you please go out there with me and solve the mystery of the ghost?”

CHAPTER II

The Mysterious Mishap

SIPPING their tea, Helen Corning and her aunt waited for Nancy's decision. The young sleuth was in a dilemma. She wanted to start at once solving the mystery of the "ghost" of Twin Elms. But Nathan Comber's warning still rang in her ears and she felt that her first duty was to stay with her father.

At last she spoke. "'Mrs. Hayes" she began.

"Please call me Aunt Rosemary," the caller requested. "All Helen's friends do."

Nancy smiled. "I'd love to. Aunt Rosemary, may I please let you know tonight or tomorrow? I really must speak to my father about the case. And something else came up just this afternoon which may keep me at home for a while at least."

"I understand," Mrs. Hayes answered, trying to conceal her disappointment.

Helen Corning did not take Nancy's announcement so calmly. "Oh, Nancy, you just must come. I'm sure your dad would want you to help us. Can't you postpone the other thing until you get back?"

"I'm afraid not," said Nancy. "I can't tell you all the details, but Dad has been threatened and I feel that I ought to stay close to him."

Hannah Gruen added her fears. "Goodness only knows what they may do to Mr. Drew," she said. "Somebody could come up and hit him on the head, or poison his food in a restaurant, or"

Helen and her aunt gasped. "It's that bad?" Helen asked, her eyes growing wide.

Nancy explained that she would talk to her father when he returned home. "I hate to disappoint you," she said, "but you can see what a quandary I'm in."

"You poor girl!" said Mrs. Hayes sympathetically. "Now don't you worry about us."

Nancy smiled. "I'll worry whether I come or not," she said. "Anyway,

I'll talk to my dad tonight."

The callers left shortly. When the door had closed behind them, Hannah put an arm around Nancy's shoulders. "I'm sure everything will come out all right for everybody," she said. "I'm sorry I talked about those dreadful things that might happen to your father. I let my imagination run away with me, just like they say Miss Flora's does with her."

"You're a great comfort, Hannah dear," said Nancy. "To tell the truth, I have thought of all kinds of horrible things myself." She began to pace the floor. "I wish Dad would get home."

During the next hour she went to the window at least a dozen times, hoping to see her father's car coming up the street It was not until six o'clock that she heard the crunch of wheels on the driveway and saw Mr. Drew's sedan pull into the garage.

"He's safe!" she cried out to Hannah, who was testing potatoes that were baking in the oven.

In a flash Nancy was out the back door and running to meet her father. "Oh, Dad, I'm so glad to see you!" she exclaimed.

She gave him a tremendous hug and a resounding kiss. He responded affectionately, but gave a little chuckle. "What have I done to rate this extra bit of attention?" he teased. With a wink he added, "I know. Your date for tonight is off and you want me to substitute."

"Oh, Dad," Nancy replied. "Of course my date's not off. But I'm just about to call it off."

"Why?" Mr. Drew questioned. "Isn't Dirk going to stay on your list?"

"It's not that," Nancy replied. "It's because because you're in terrible danger, Dad. I've been warned not to leave you."

Instead of looking alarmed, the lawyer burst out laughing. "In terrible danger of what? Are you going to make a raid on my wallet?"

"Dad, be serious! I really mean what I'm saying. Nathan Comber was here and told me that you're in great danger and I'd better stay with you at all times."

The lawyer sobered at once. "That pest again!" he exclaimed. "There are times when I'd like to thrash the man till he begged for mercy!"

Mr. Drew suggested that they postpone their discussion about Nathan Comber until dinner was over. Then he would tell his daughter the true facts in the case. After they had finished dinner, Hannah insisted upon tidying up alone while father and daughter talked.

"I will admit that there is a bit of a muddle about the railroad bridge," Mr. Drew began. "What happened was that the lawyer who went to get Willie Wharton's signature was very ill at the time. Unfortunately, he failed to have the signature witnessed or have the attached certificate of acknowledgment executed. The poor man passed away a few hours later."

"And the other railroad lawyers failed to notice that the signature hadn't been witnessed or the certificate notarized?" Nancy asked.

"Not right away. The matter did not come to light until the man's widow turned his brief case over to the railroad. The old deed to Wharton's property was there, so the lawyers assumed that the signature on the contract was genuine. The contract for the railroad bridge was awarded and work began. Suddenly Nathan Comber appeared, saying he represented Willie Wharton and others who had owned property which the railroad had bought on either side of the Muskoka River."

"I understood from Mr. Comber," said Nancy, "that Willie Wharton is trying to get more money for his neighbors by holding out for a higher price himself."

"That's the story. Personally, I think it's a sharp deal on Comber's part. The more people he can get money for, the higher his commission," Mr. Drew stated.

"What a mess!" Nancy exclaimed. "And what can be done?"

"To tell the truth, there is little anyone can do until Willie Wharton is found. Comber knows this, of course, and has probably advised Wharton to stay in hiding until the railroad agrees to give everybody more money."

Nancy had been watching her father intently. Now she saw an expression of eagerness come over his face. He leaned forward in his chair and said, "But I think I'm about to outwit Mr. Nathan Comber. I've had a tip that Willie Wharton is in Chicago and I'm leaving Monday morning to find out."

Mr. Drew went on, "I believe that Wharton will say he did sign the

contract of sale which the railroad company has and will readily consent to having the certificate of acknowledgment notarized. Then, of course, the railroad won't pay him or any of the other property owners another cent."

"But, Dad, you still haven't convinced me you're not in danger," Nancy reminded him.

"Nancy dear," her father replied, "I feel that I am not in danger. Comber is nothing but a blow-hard. I doubt that he or Willie Wharton or any of the other property owners would resort to violence to keep me from working on this case. He's just trying to scare me into persuading the railroad to accede to his demands."

Nancy looked skeptical.. "But don't forget that you're about to go to Chicago and produce the very man Comber and those property owners don't want around here just now."

"I know." Mr. Drew nodded. "But I still doubt if anyone would use force to keep me from going." Laughingly the lawyer added, "So I won't need you as a bodyguard, Nancy."

His daughter gave a sigh of resignation. "All right, Dad, you know best." She then proceeded to tell her father about the Twin Elms mystery, which she had been asked to solve. "If you approve," Nancy said in conclusion, "I'd like to go over there with Helen."

Mr. Drew had listened with great interest. Now, after a few moments of thought, he smiled. "Go by all means, Nancy. I realize you've been itching to work on a new caseand this sounds like a real challenge. But please be careful."

"Oh, I will, Dad!" Nancy promised, her face lighting up. "Thanks a million." She jumped from her chair, gave her father a kiss, then went to phone Helen the good news. It was arranged that the girls would go to Twin Elms on Monday morning.

Nancy returned to the living room, eager to discuss the mystery further. Her father, however, glanced at his wrist watch. "Say, young lady, you'd better go dress for that date of yours." He winked. "I happen to know that Dirk doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Especially by any of my mysteries." She laughed and hurried upstairs to change into a dance dress.

Half an hour later Dirk Jackson arrived. Nancy and the red-haired,

former high-school tennis champion drove off to pick up another couple and attend an amateur play and dance given by the local Little Theater group.

Nancy thoroughly enjoyed herself and was sorry when the affair ended. With the promise of another date as soon as she returned from Twin Elms, Nancy said good night and waved from her doorway to the departing boy. As she prepared for bed, she thought of the play, the excellent orchestra, how lucky she was to have Dirk for a date, and what fun it had all been. But then her thoughts turned to Helen Corning and her relatives in the haunted house, Twin Elms.

“I can hardly wait for Monday to come,” she murmured to herself as she fell asleep.

The following morning she and her father attended church together. Hannah said she was going to a special service that afternoon and therefore would stay at home during the morning.

“I’ll have a good dinner waiting for you,” she announced, as the Drews left.

After the service was over, Mr. Drew said he would like to drive down to the waterfront and see what progress had been made on the new bridge. “The railroad is going ahead with construction on the far side of the river,” he told Nancy.

“Is the Wharton property on this side?” Nancy asked.

“Yes. And I must get to the truth of this mixed-up situation, so that work can be started on this side too.”

Mr. Drew wound among the many streets leading down to the Muskoka River, then took the vehicular bridge across. He turned toward the construction area and presently parked his car. As he and Nancy stepped from the sedan, he looked ruefully at her pumps.

“It’s going to be rough walking down to the waterfront,” he said. “Perhaps you had better wait here.”

“Oh, I’ll be all right,” Nancy assured him. “I’d like to see what’s being done.”

Various pieces of large machinery stood about on the high grounda crane, a derrick, and hydraulic shovels. As the Drews walked toward the river, they passed a large truck. It faced the river and stood at the

top of an incline just above two of the four enormous concrete piers which had already been built.

“I suppose there will be matching piers on the opposite side,” Nancy mused, as she and her father reached the riverbank. They paused in the space between the two huge abutments. Mr. Drew glanced from side to side as if he had heard something. Suddenly Nancy detected a noise behind them.

Turning, she was horrified to see that the big truck was moving toward them. No one was at the wheel and the great vehicle was gathering speed at every moment.

“Dad!” she screamed.

In the brief second of warning, the truck almost seemed to leap toward the water. Nancy and her father, hemmed in by the concrete piers, had no way to escape being run down.

“Dive!” Mr. Drew ordered.

Without hesitation, he and Nancy made running flat dives into the water, and with arms flailing and legs kicking, swam furiously out of harm’s way.

The truck thundered into the water and sank immediately up to the cab. The Drews turned and came back to the shore.

“Whew! That was a narrow escape!” the lawyer exclaimed, as he helped his daughter retrieve her pumps which had come off in the oozy bank. “And what sights we are!” Nancy remarked.

“Indeed we are,” her father agreed, as they trudged up the incline. “I’d like to get hold of the workman who was careless enough to leave that heavy truck on the slope without the brake on properly.”

Nancy was not so sure that the near accident was the fault of a careless workman. Nathan Comber had warned her that Mr. Drew’s life was in danger. The threat might already have been put into action!

CHAPTER III

A Stolen Necklace

"WE'D better get home in a hurry and change our clothes," said Mr. Drew. "And I'll call the contracting company to tell them what happened."

"And notify the police?" Nancy suggested.

She dropped behind her father and gazed over the surrounding ground for telltale footprints. Presently she saw several at the edge of the spot where the truck had stood.

"Dad!" the young sleuth called out. "I may have found a clue to explain how that truck started downhill."

Her father came back and looked at the footprints. They definitely had not been made by a workman's boots.

"You may think me an old worrier, Dad," Nancy spoke up, "but these footprints, made by a man's business shoes, convince me that somebody deliberately tried to injure us with that truck."

The lawyer stared at his daughter. Then he looked down at the ground. From the size of the shoe and the length of the stride one could easily perceive that the wearer of the shoes was not tall. Nancy asked her father if he thought one of the workmen on the project could be responsible.

"I just can't believe anyone associated with the contracting company would want to injure us," Mr. Drew said.

Nancy reminded her father of Nathan Comber's warning. "It might be one of the property owners, or even Willie Wharton himself."

"Wharton is short and has a small foot," the lawyer conceded. "And I must admit that these look like fresh footprints. As a matter of fact, they show that whoever was here ran off in a hurry. He may have released the brake on the truck, then jumped out and run away."

"Yes," said Nancy. "And that means the attack was deliberate."

Mr. Drew did not reply. He continued walking up the hill, lost in thought. Nancy followed and they climbed into the car. They drove

home in silence, each puzzling over the strange incident of the runaway truck. Upon reaching the house, they were greeted by a loud exclamation of astonishment.

“My goodness!” Hannah Gruen cried out. “Whatever in the world happened to you?”

They explained hastily, then hurried upstairs to bathe and change into dry clothes. By the time they reached the first floor again, Hannah had placed sherbet glasses filled with orange and grapefruit slices on the table. All during the delicious dinner of spring lamb, rice and mushrooms, fresh peas and chocolate angel cake with vanilla ice cream, the conversation revolved around the railroad bridge mystery and then the haunted Twin Elms mansion.

“I knew things wouldn’t be quiet around here for long,” Hannah Gruen remarked with a smile. “Tomorrow you’ll both be off on big adventures. I certainly wish you both success.”

“Thank you, Hannah,” said Nancy. She laughed. “I’d better get a good night’s sleep. From now on I may be kept awake by ghosts and strange noises.”

“I’m a little uneasy about your going to Twin Elms,” the housekeeper told her. “Please promise me that you’ll be careful.”

“Of course,” Nancy replied. Turning to her father, she said, “Pretend I’ve said the same thing to you about being careful.”

The lawyer chuckled and pounded his chest. “You know me. I can be pretty tough when the need arises.”

Early the next morning Nancy drove her father to the airport in her blue convertible. Just before she kissed him good-by at the turnstile, he said, “I expect to return on Wednesday, Nancy. Suppose I stop off at Cliffwood and see how you’re making out?”

“Wonderful, Dad! I’ll be looking for you.”

As soon as her father left, Nancy drove directly to Helen Coming’s home. The pretty, brunette girl came from the front door of the white cottage, swinging a suitcase. She tossed it into the rear of Nancy’s convertible and climbed in.

“I ought to be scared,” said Helen. “Goodness only knows what’s ahead of us. But right now I’m so happy nothing could upset me.”

“What happened?” Nancy asked as she started the car. “Did you inherit a million?”

“Something better than that,” Helen replied. “Nancy, I want to tell you a big, big secret. I’m going to be married!”

Nancy slowed the car and pulled to the side of the street. Leaning over to hug her friend, she said, “Why, Helen, how wonderful! Who is he? And tell me all about it. This is rather sudden, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” Helen confessed. “His name is Jim Archer and he’s simply out of this world. I’m a pretty lucky girl. I met him a couple of months ago when he was home on a short vacation. He works for the Tristam Oil Company and has spent two years abroad. Jim will be away a while longer, and then be given a position here in the States.”

As Nancy started the car up once more, her eyes twinkled. “Helen Corning, have you been engaged for two months and didn’t tell me?”

Helen shook her head. “Jim and I have been corresponding ever since he left. Last night he telephoned from overseas and asked me to marry him.” Helen giggled. “I said yes in a big hurry. Then he asked to speak to Dad. My father gave his consent but insisted that our engagement not be announced until Jim’s return to this country.”

The two girls discussed all sorts of delightful plans for Helen’s wedding and before they knew it they had reached the town of Cliffwood.

“My great-grandmother’s estate is about two miles out of town,” Helen said. “Go down Main Street and turn right at the fork.”

Ten minutes later she pointed out Twin Elms, From the road one could see little of the house. A high stone wall ran along the front of the estate and beyond it were many tall trees. Nancy turned into the driveway which twisted and wound among elms, oaks, and maples.

Presently the old Colonial home came into view. Helen said it had been built in 1785 and had been given its name because of the two elm trees which stood at opposite ends of the long building. They had grown to be giants and their foliage was beautiful. The mansion was of red brick and nearly all the walls were covered with ivy. There was a ten-foot porch with tall white pillars at the huge front door.

“It’s charming!” Nancy commented as she pulled up to the porch.

“Wait until you see the grounds,” said Helen. “There are several old, old buildings. An icehouse, a smokehouse, a kitchen, and servants’ cottages.”

“The mansion certainly doesn’t look spooky from the outside,” Nancy commented.

At that moment the great door opened and Aunt Rosemary came outside. “Hello, girls,” she greeted them. “I’m so glad to see you.”

Nancy felt the warmness of the welcome but thought that it was tinged with worry. She wondered if another “ghost” incident had taken place at the mansion.

The girls took their suitcases from the car and followed Mrs. Hayes inside. Although the furnishings looked rather worn, they were still very beautiful. The high-ceilinged rooms opened off a center hall and in a quick glance Nancy saw lovely damask draperies, satin-covered sofas and chairs, and on the walls, family portraits in large gilt frames of scrollwork design.

Aunt Rosemary went to the foot of the shabbily carpeted stairway, took hold of the handsome mahogany balustrade, and called, “Mother, the girls are here!”

In a moment a slender, frail-looking woman with snow-white hair started to descend the steps. Her face, though older in appearance than Rosemary’s, had the same gentle smile. As Miss Flora reached the foot of the stairs, she held out her hands to both girls.

At once Helen said, “I’d like to present Nancy Drew, Miss Flora.”

“I’m so glad you could come, my dear,” the elderly woman said. “I know that you’re going to solve this mystery which has been bothering Rosemary and me. I’m sorry not to be able to entertain you more auspiciously, but a haunted house hardly lends itself to gaiety.”

The dainty, yet stately, Miss Flora swept toward a room which she referred to as the parlor. It was opposite the library. She sat down in a high-backed chair and asked everyone else to be seated.

“Mother,” said Aunt Rosemary, “we don’t have to be so formal with Nancy and Helen. I’m sure they’ll understand that we’ve just been badly frightened.” She turned toward the girls. “Something happened a little while ago that has made us very jittery.”

“Yes,” Miss Flora said. “A pearl necklace of mine was stolen!”

“You don’t mean the lovely one that has been in the family so many years!” Helen cried out.

The two women nodded. Then Miss Flora said, “Oh, I probably was very foolish. It’s my own fault. While I was in my room, I took the necklace from the hiding place where I usually keep it. The catch had not worked well the last time I wore the pearls and I wanted to examine it. While I was doing this, Rosemary called to me to come downstairs. The gardener was here and wanted to talk about some work. I put the necklace in my dresser drawer. When I returned ten minutes later the necklace wasn’t there!”

“How dreadful!” said Nancy sympathetically. “Had anybody come into the house during that time?”

“Not to our knowledge,” Aunt Rosemary replied. “Ever since we’ve had this ghost visiting us we’ve kept every door and window on the first floor locked all the time.”

Nancy asked if the two women had gone out into the garden to speak to their helper. “Mother did,” said Mrs. Hayes. “But I was in the kitchen the entire time. If anyone came in the back door, I certainly would have seen the person.”

“Is there a back stairway to the second floor?” Nancy asked.

“Yes,” Miss Flora answered. “But there are doors at both top and bottom and we keep them locked. No one could have gone up that way.”

“Then anyone who came into the house had to go up by way of the front stairs?”

“Yes.” Aunt Rosemary smiled a little. “But if anyone had, I would have noticed. You probably heard how those stairs creak when Mother came down. This can be avoided if you hug the wall, but practically no one knows that,”

“May I go upstairs and look around?” Nancy questioned.

“Of course, dear. And I’ll show you and Helen to your room,” Aunt Rosemary said.

The girls picked up their suitcases and followed the two women up the

stairs. Nancy and Helen were given a large, quaint room at the front of the old house over the library. They quickly deposited their luggage, then Miss Flora led the way across the hall to her room, which was directly above the parlor. It was large and very attractive with its canopied mahogany bed and an old-fashioned candlewick spread. The dresser, dressing table, and chairs also were mahogany. Long chintz draperies hung at the windows.

An eerie feeling began to take possession of Nancy. She could almost feel the presence of a ghostly burglar on the premises. Though she tried to shake off the mood, it persisted. Finally she told herself that it was possible the thief was still around. If so, he must be hiding.

Against one wall stood a large walnut wardrobe. Helen saw Nancy gazing at it intently. She went over and whispered, “Do you think there might be someone inside?”

“Who knows?” Nancy replied in a low voice. “Let’s find out!”

She walked across the room, and taking hold of the two knobs on the double doors, opened them wide.

CHAPTER IV

Strange Music

THE ANXIOUS group stared inside the wardrobe. No one stood there. Dresses, suits, and coats hung in an orderly row.

Nancy took a step forward and began separating them. Someone, she thought, might be hiding behind the clothes. The others in the room held their breaths as she made a thorough search.

“No one here!” she finally announced, and a sigh of relief escaped the lips of Miss Flora and Aunt Rosemary.

The young sleuth said she would like to make a thorough inspection of all possible hiding places on the second floor. With Helen helping her, they went from room to room, opening wardrobe doors and looking under beds. They did not find the thief.

Nancy suggested that Miss Flora and Aunt Rosemary report the theft to the police, but the older woman shook her head. Mrs. Hayes, although she agreed this might be wise, added softly, “Mother just might be mistaken. She’s a little forgetful at times about where she puts things.”

With this possibility in mind, she and the girls looked in every drawer in the room, under the mattress and pillows, and even in the pockets of Miss Flora’s clothes. The pearl necklace was not found. Nancy suggested that she and Helen try to find out how the thief had made his entrance.

Helen led the way outdoors. At once Nancy began to look for footprints. No tracks were visible on the front or back porches, or on any of the walks, which were made of finely crushed stone.

“We’ll look in the soft earth beneath the windows,” Nancy said. “Maybe the thief climbed in.”

“But Aunt Rosemary said all the windows on the first floor are kept locked,” Helen objected.

“No doubt,” Nancy said. “But I think we should look for footprints just the same.”

The girls went from window to window, but there were no footprints beneath any. Finally Nancy stopped and looked thoughtfully at the ivy on the walls.

“Do you think the thief climbed up to the second floor that way?” Helen asked her. “But there’d still be footprints on the ground.”

Nancy said that the thief could have carried a plank with him, laid it down, and stepped from the walk to the wall of the house. “Then he could have climbed up the ivy and down again, and gotten back to the walk without leaving any footprints.”

Once more Nancy went around the entire house, examining every bit of ivy which wound up from the foundation. Finally she said, “No, the thief didn’t get into the house this way.”

“Well, he certainly didn’t fly in,” said Helen. “So how did he enter?”

Nancy laughed. “If I could tell you that I’d have the mystery half solved.”

She said that she would like to look around the grounds of Twin Elms. “It may give us a clue as to how the thief got into the house.”

As they strolled along, Nancy kept a sharp lookout but saw nothing suspicious. At last they came to a half-crumbled brick walk laid out in an interesting crisscross pattern.

“Where does this walk lead?” Nancy asked.

“Well, I guess originally it went over to Riverview Manor, the next property,” Helen replied. “I’ll show you that mansion later. The first owner was a brother of the man who built this place.”

Helen went on to say that Riverview Manor was a duplicate of Twin Elms mansion. The two brothers had been inseparable companions, but their sons who later lived there had had a violent quarrel and had become lifelong enemies.

“Riverview Manor has been sold several times during the years but has been vacant for a long time.”

“You mean no one lives there now?” Nancy asked. As Helen nodded, she added with a laugh, “Then maybe that’s the ghost’s home!”

“In that case he really must be a ghost,” said Helen lightly. “There’s

not a piece of furniture in the house."

The two girls returned to the Twin Elms mansion and reported their lack of success in picking up a clue to the intruder. Nancy, recalling that many Colonial houses had secret entrances and passageways, asked Miss Flora, "Do you know of any secret entrance to your home that the thief could use?"

She said no, and explained that her husband had been a rather reticent person and had passed away when Rosemary was only a baby. "It's just possible he knew of a secret entrance, but did not want to worry me by telling me about it," Mrs. Turnbull said.

Aunt Rosemary, sensing that her mother was becoming alarmed by the questions, suggested that they all have lunch. The two girls went with her to the kitchen and helped prepare a tasty meal of chicken salad, biscuits, and fruit gelatin.

During the meal the conversation covered several subjects, but always came back to the topic of the mystery. They had just finished eating when suddenly Nancy sat straight up in her chair.

"What's the matter?" Helen asked her.

Nancy was staring out the dining-room door toward the stairway in the hall. Then she turned to Miss Flora. "Did you leave a radio on in your bedroom?"

"Why, no."

"Did you, Aunt Rosemary?"

"No. Neither Mother nor I turned our radios on this morning. Why do" She stopped speaking, for now all of them could distinctly hear music coming from the second floor.

Helen and Nancy were out of their chairs instantly. They dashed into the hall and up the stairway. The music was coming from Miss Flora's room, and when the girls rushed in, they knew indeed that it was from her radio.

Nancy went over to examine the set. It was an old one and did not have a clock attachment with an automatic control.

"Someone came into this room and turned on the radio!" she stated.

A look of alarm came over Helen's face, but she tried to shake off her nervousness and asked, "Nancy, do you think the radio could have been turned on by remote control? I've heard of such things."

Nancy said she doubted this. "I'm afraid, Helen, that the thief has been in the house all the time. He and the ghost are one and the same person. Oh, I wish we had looked before in the cellar and the attic. Maybe it's not too late. Come on!"

Helen, instead of moving from the room, stared at the fireplace. "Nancy," she said, "do you suppose someone is hiding up there?"

Without hesitation she crossed the room, got down on her knees, and tried to look up the chimney. The damper was closed. Reaching her arm up, Helen pulled the handle to open it.

The next moment she cried out, "Ugh!"

"Oh, Helen, you poor thing!" Nancy exclaimed, running to her friend's side.

A shower of soot had come down, covering Helen's hair, face, shoulders, and arms.

"Get me a towel, will you, Nancy?" she requested.

Nancy dashed to the bathroom and grabbed two large towels. She wrapped them around her friend, then went with Helen to help her with a shampoo and general cleanup job. Finally Nancy brought her another sports dress.

"I guess my idea about chimneys wasn't so good," Helen stated ruefully. "And we're probably too late to catch the thief."

Nevertheless, she and Nancy climbed the stairs to the attic and looked behind trunks and boxes to see if anyone were hiding. Next, the girls went to the cellar and inspected the various rooms there. Still there was no sign of the thief who had entered Twin Elms.

After Miss Flora had heard the whole story, she gave a nervous sigh. "It's the ghostthere's no other explanation."

"But why," Aunt Rosemary asked, "has a ghost suddenly started performing here? This house has been occupied since 1785 and no ghost was ever reported haunting the place."

“Well, apparently robbery is the motive,” Nancy replied. “But why the thief bothers to frighten you is something I haven’t figured out yet.”

“The main thing,” Helen spoke up, “is to catch him!”

“Oh, if we only could!” Miss Flora said, her voice a bit shaky.

The girls were about to pick up the luncheon dishes from the table, to carry them to the kitchen, when the front door knocker sounded loudly.

“Oh, dear,” said Miss Flora, “who can that be? Maybe it’s the thief and he’s come to harm us!”

Aunt Rosemary put an arm around her mother’s shoulders. “Please don’t worry,” she begged. “I think our caller is probably the man who wants to buy Twin Elms.” She turned to Nancy and Helen. “But Mother doesn’t want to sell for the low price that he is offering.”

Nancy said she would go to the door. She set the dishes down and walked out to the hall. Reaching the great door, she flung it open.

Nathan Comber stood there!

CHAPTER V

A Puzzling Interview

FOR SEVERAL seconds Nathan Comber stared at Nancy in disbelief. "You!" he cried out finally.

"You didn't expect to find me here, did you?" she asked coolly.

"I certainly didn't. I thought you'd taken my advice and stayed with your father. Young people today are so hardhearted!" Comber wagged his head in disgust.

Nancy ignored Comber's remarks. Shrugging, the man pushed his way into the hall. "I know this. If anything happens to your father, you'll never forgive yourself. But you can't blame Nathan Comber! I warned you!"

Still Nancy made no reply. She kept looking at him steadily, trying to figure out what was really in his mind. She was convinced it was not solicitude for her father.

Nathan Comber changed the subject abruptly.

"I'd like to see Mrs. Turnbull and Mrs. Hayes," he said. "Go call them."

Nancy was annoyed by Comber's crudeness, but she turned around and went down the hall to the dining room.

"We heard every word," Miss Flora said in a whisper. "I shan't see Mr. Comber. I don't want to sell this house."

Nancy was amazed to hear this. "You mean he's the person who wants to buy it?"

"Yes."

Instantly Nancy was on the alert. Because of the nature of the railroad deal in which Nathan Comber was involved, she was distrustful of his motives in wanting to buy Twin Elms. It flashed through her mind that perhaps he was trying to buy it at a very low price and planned to sell it off in building lots at a huge profit.

"Suppose I go tell him you don't want to sell," Nancy suggested in a low voice.

But her caution was futile. Hearing footsteps behind her, she turned to see Comber standing in the doorway.

“Howdy, everybody!” he said.

Miss Flora, Aunt Rosemary, and Helen showed annoyance. It was plain that all of them thought the man completely lacking in good manners.

Aunt Rosemary’s jaw was set in a grim line, but she said politely, “Helen, this is Mr. Comber. Mr. Comber, my niece, Miss Corning.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said their caller, extending a hand to shake Helen’s.

“Nancy, I guess you’ve met Mr. Comber,” Aunt Rosemary went on.

“Oh, sure!” Nathan Comber said with a somewhat raucous laugh. “Nancy and me, we’ve met!”

“Only once,” Nancy said pointedly.

Ignoring her rebuff, he went on, “Nancy Drew is a very strange young lady. Her father’s in great danger and I tried to warn her to stick close to him. Instead of that, she’s out here visiting you folks.”

“Her father’s in danger?” Miss Flora said worriedly.

“Dad says he’s not,” Nancy replied. “And besides, I’m sure my father would know how to take care of any enemies.” She looked straight at Nathan Comber, as if to let him know that the Drews were not easily frightened.

“Well,” the caller said, “let’s get down to business.” He pulled an envelope full of papers from his pocket. “Everything’s hereall ready for you to sign, Mrs. Turnbull.”

“I don’t wish to sell at such a low figure,” Miss Flora told him firmly. “In fact, I don’t know that I want to sell at all.”

Nathan Comber tossed his head. “You’ll sell all right,” he prophesied. “I’ve been talking to some of the folks downtown. Everybody knows this old place is haunted and nobody would give you five cents for itthat is, nobody but me.”

As he waited for his words to sink in, Nancy spoke up, “If the house is haunted, why do you want it?”

“Well,” Comber answered, “I guess I’m a gambler at heart. I’d be willing to put some money into this place, even if there is a ghost parading around.” He laughed loudly, then went on, “I declare it might be a real pleasure to meet a ghost and get the better of it!”

Nancy thought with disgust, “Nathan Comber, you’re about the most conceited, obnoxious person I’ve met in a long time.”

Suddenly the expression of cunning on the man’s face changed completely. An almost wistful look came into his eyes. He sat down on one of the dining-room chairs and rested his chin in his hand.

“I guess you think I’m just a hardheaded business man with no feelings,” he said. “The truth is I’m a real softy. I’ll tell you why I want this old house so bad. I’ve always dreamed of owning a Colonial mansion, and having a kinship with early America. You see, my family were poor folks in Europe. Now that I’ve made a little money, I’d like to have a home like this to roam around in and enjoy its traditions.”

Miss Flora seemed to be touched by Comber’s story. “I had no idea you wanted the place so much,” she said kindly. “Maybe I ought to give it up. It’s really too big for us.”

As Aunt Rosemary saw her mother weakening, she said quickly, “You don’t have to sell this house, Mother. You know you love it. So far as the ghost is concerned, I’m sure that mystery is going to be cleared up. Then you’d be sorry you had parted with Twin Elms. Please don’t say yes!”

As Comber gave Mrs. Hayes a dark look, Nancy asked him, “Why don’t you buy Riverview Manor? It’s a duplicate of this place and is for sale. You probably could purchase it at a lower price than you could this one.”

“I’ve seen that place,” the man returned. “It’s in a bad state. It would cost me a mint of money to fix it up. No sir. I want this place and I’m going to have it!”

This bold remark was too much for Aunt Rosemary. Her eyes blazing, she said, “Mr. Comber, this interview is at an end. Good-by!”

To Nancy’s delight and somewhat to her amusement, Nathan Comber obeyed the “order” to leave. He seemed to be almost meek as he walked through the hall and let himself out the front door.

“Of all the nerve!” Helen burst out.

“Perhaps we shouldn’t be too hard on the man,” Miss Flora said timidly. “His story is a pathetic one and I can see how he might want to pretend he had an old American family background.”

“I’d like to bet a cookie Mr. Comber didn’t mean one word of what he was saying,” Helen remarked.

“Oh dear, I’m so confused,” said Miss Flora, her voice trembling. “Let’s all sit down in the parlor and talk about it a little more.”

The two girls stepped back as Miss Flora, then Aunt Rosemary, left the dining room. They followed to the parlor and sat down together on the recessed couch by the fireplace. Nancy, on a sudden hunch, ran to a front window to see which direction Comber had taken. To her surprise he was walking down the winding driveway.

“That’s strange. Evidently he didn’t drive,” Nancy told herself. “It’s quite a walk into town to get a train or bus to River Heights.”

As Nancy mulled over this idea, trying to figure out the answer, she became conscious of creaking sounds. Helen suddenly gave a shriek. Nancy turned quickly.

“Look!” Helen cried, pointing toward the ceiling, and everyone stared upward.

The crystal chandelier had suddenly started swaying from side to side!

“The ghost again!” Miss Flora cried out. She looked as if she were about to faint.

Nancy’s eyes quickly swept the room. Nothing else in it was moving, so vibration was not causing the chandelier to sway. As it swung back and forth, a sudden thought came to the young sleuth. Maybe someone in Miss Flora’s room above was causing the shaking.

“I’m going upstairs to investigate,” Nancy told the others.

Racing noiselessly on tiptoe out of the room and through the hall, she began climbing the stairs, hugging the wall so the steps would not creak. As she neared the top, Nancy was sure she heard a door close. Hurrying along the hall, she burst into Miss Flora’s bedroom. No one was in sight!

“Maybe this time the ghost couldn’t get away and is in that wardrobe!” Nancy thought.

Helen and her relatives had come up the stairs behind Nancy. They reached the bedroom just as she flung open the wardrobe doors. But for the second time she found no one hiding there.

Nancy bit her lip in vexation. The ghost was clever indeed. Where had he gone? She had given him no time to go down the hall or run into another room. Yet there was no denying the fact that he had been in Miss Flora's room!

"Tell us why you came up," Helen begged her. Nancy told her theory, but suddenly she realized that maybe she was letting her imagination run. wild. It was possible, she admitted to the others, that no one had caused the chandelier to shake.

"There's only one way to find out," she said. "I'll make a test."

Nancy asked Helen to go back to the first floor and watch the chandelier. She would try to make it sway by rocking from side to side on the floor above it.

"If this works, then I'm sure we've picked up a clue to the ghost," she said hopefully.

Helen readily agreed and left the room. When Nancy thought her friend had had time to reach the parlor below, she began to rock hard from side to side on the spot above the chandelier.

She had barely started the test when from the first floor Helen Corning gave a piercing scream!

CHAPTER VI

The Gorilla Face

“SOMETHING has happened to Helen!” Aunt Rosemary cried out fearfully.

Nancy was already racing through the second-floor hallway. Reaching the stairs, she leaped down them two steps at a time. Helen Corning had collapsed in a wing chair in the parlor, her hands over her face.

“Helen! What happened?” Nancy asked, reaching her friend’s side.

“Out there! Looking in that window!” Helen pointed to the front window of the parlor next to the hall. “The most horrible face I ever saw!”

“Was it a man’s face?” Nancy questioned.

“Oh, I don’t know. It looked just like a gorilla!” Helen closed her eyes as if to shut out the memory of the sight.

Nancy did not wait to hear any more. In another second she was at the front door and had yanked it open. Stepping outside, she looked all around. She could see no animal near the house, nor any sign under the window that one had stood there.

Puzzled, the young sleuth hurried down the steps and began a search of the grounds. By this time Helen had collected her wits and come outside. She joined Nancy and together they looked in every outbuilding and behind every clump of bushes on the grounds of Twin Elms. They did not find one footprint or any other evidence to prove that a gorilla or other creature had been on the grounds of the estate.

“I saw it! I know I saw it!” Helen insisted.

“I don’t doubt you,” Nancy replied.

“Then what explanation is there?” Helen demanded. “You know I never did believe in spooks. But if we have many more of these weird happenings around here, I declare I’m going to start believing in ghosts.”

Nancy laughed. “Don’t worry, Helen,” she said. “There’ll be a logical explanation for the face at the window.”

The girls walked back to the front door of the mansion. Miss Flora and Aunt Rosemary stood there and immediately insisted upon knowing what had happened. As Helen told them, Nancy once more surveyed the outside of the window at which Helen had seen the terrifying face.

“I have a theory,” she spoke up. “Our ghost simply leaned across from the end of the porch and held a mask in front of the window.” Nancy stretched her arm out to demonstrate how this was possible.

“So that’s why he didn’t leave any footprints under the window,” Helen said. “But he certainly got away from here fast.” She suddenly laughed. “He must be on some ghosts’ track team.”

Her humor, Nancy was glad to see, relieved the tense situation. She had noticed Miss Flora leaning wearily on her daughter’s arm.

“You’d better lie down and rest, Mother,” Mrs. Hayes advised.

“I guess I will,” Aunt Flora agreed.

It was suggested that the elderly woman use Aunt Rosemary’s room, while the others continued the experiment with the chandelier.

Helen and Aunt Rosemary went into the parlor and waited as Nancy ascended the front stairway and went to Miss Flora’s bedroom. Once more she began to rock from side to side. Downstairs, Aunt Rosemary and her niece were gazing intently at the ceiling.

“Look!” Helen exclaimed, pointing to the crystal chandelier. “It’s moving!” In a moment it swung to the left, then back to the right.

“Nancy has proved that the ghost was up in my mother’s room!” Aunt Rosemary said excitedly.

After a few minutes the rocking motion of the chandelier slackened and finally stopped. Nancy came hurrying down the steps.

“Did it work?” she called.

“Yes, it did,” Aunt Rosemary replied. “Oh, Nancy, we must have two ghosts!”

“Why do you say that?” Helen asked.

“One rocking the chandelier, the other holding the horrible face up to the window. No one could have gone from Miss Flora’s room to the front porch in such a short time. Oh, this complicates everything!”

“It certainly does,” Nancy agreed. “The question is, are the two ghosts in cahoots? Or, it’s just possible, there is only one. He could have disappeared from Miss Flora’s room without our seeing him and somehow hurried to the first floor and let himself out the front door while we were upstairs. I’m convinced there is at least one secret entrance into this house, and maybe more. I think our next step should be to try to find itor them.”

“We’d better wash the luncheon dishes first,” Aunt Rosemary suggested.

As she and the girls worked, they discussed the mystery, and Mrs. Hayes revealed that she had talked to her mother about leaving the house, whether or not she sold it.

“I thought we might at least go away for a little vacation, but Mother refuses to leave. She says she intends to remain right here until this ghost business is settled.”

Helen smiled. “Nancy, my great-grandmother is a wonderful woman. She has taught me a lot about courage and perseverance. I hope if I ever reach her age, I’ll have half as much.”

“Yes, she’s an example to all of us,” Aunt Rosemary concurred.

Nancy nodded. “I agree. I haven’t known your mother long, Aunt Rosemary, but I think she is one of the dearest persons I’ve ever met.”

“If Miss Flora won’t leave,” said Helen, “I guess that means we all stay.”

“That’s settled,” said Nancy with a smile.

After the dishes were put away, the girls were ready to begin their search for a secret entrance into the mansion.

“Let’s start with Miss Flora’s room,” Helen suggested.

“That’s a logical place,” Nancy replied, and took the lead up the stairway.

Every inch of the wall, which was paneled in maple halfway to the ceiling, was tapped. No hollow sound came from any section of it to indicate an open space behind. The bureau, dressing table, and bed were pulled away from the walls and Nancy carefully inspected every inch of the paneling for cracks or wide seams to indicate a concealed

door.

“Nothing yet,” she announced, and then decided to inspect the sides of the fireplace.

The paneled sides and brick front revealed nothing. Next, Nancy looked at the sides and rear of

the stone interior. She could see nothing unusual, and the blackened stones did not look as if they had ever been disturbed.

She closed the damper which Helen had left open, and then suggested that the searchers transfer to another room on the second floor. But no trace of any secret entrance to the mansion could be found.

“I think we’ve had enough investigation for one day,” Aunt Rosemary remarked.

Nancy was about to say that she was not tired and would like to continue. But she realized that Mrs. Hayes had made this suggestion because her mother was once more showing signs of fatigue and strain.

Helen, who also realized the situation, said, “Let’s have an early supper. I’m starved I”

“I am, too,” Nancy replied, laughing gaily.

The mood was contagious and soon Miss Flora seemed to have forgotten about her mansion being haunted. She sat in the kitchen while Aunt Rosemary and the girls cooked the meal.

“Um, steak and French fried potatoes, fresh peas, and yummy floating island for dessert,” said Helen. “I can hardly wait.”

“Fruit cup first,” Aunt Rosemary announced, taking a bowl of fruit from the refrigerator.

Soon the group was seated at the table. Tactfully steering the conversation away from the mystery, Nancy asked Miss Flora to tell the group about parties and dances which had been held in the mansion long ago.

The elderly woman smiled in recollection. “I remember one story my husband told me of something that happened when he was a little boy,” Miss Flora began. “His parents were holding a masquerade and

he was supposed to be in bed fast asleep. His nurse had gone downstairs to talk to some of the servants. The music awakened my husband and he decided it would be great fun to join the guests.

“Ill put on a costume myself,’ he said to himself. He knew there were some packed in a trunk in the attic.” Miss Flora paused. “By the way, girls, I think that sometime while you are here you ought to see them. They’re beautiful.

“Well, Everett went to the attic, opened the trunk, and searched until he found a soldier’s outfit. It was very fancyred coat and white trousers. He had quite a struggle getting it on and had to turn the coat sleeves way up. The knee britches came to his ankles, and the hat was so large it came down over his ears.”

By this time Miss Flora’s audience was laughing and Aunt Rosemary remarked, “My father really must have looked funny. Please go on, Mother.”

“Little Everett came down the stairs and mingled with the masqueraders at the dance. For a while he wasn’t noticed, then suddenly his mother discovered the queer-looking figure.”

“And,” Aunt Rosemary interrupted, “quickly put him back to bed, I’m sure.”

Miss Flora laughed. “That’s where you’re wrong. The guests thought the whole thing was such fun that they insisted Everett stay. Some of the women danced with himhe went to dancing school and was an excellent dancer. Then they gave him some strawberries and cream and cake.”

Helen remarked, “And then put him to bed.”

Again Miss Flora laughed. “The poor little fellow never knew that he had fallen asleep while he was eating, and his father had to carry him upstairs. He was put into his little four-poster, costume and all. Of course his nurse was horrified, and I’m afraid that during the rest of the night the poor woman thought she would lose her position. But she didn’t. In fact, she stayed with the family until all the children were grown up.”

“Oh, that’s a wonderful story!” said Nancy.

She was about to urge Miss Flora to tell another story when the telephone rang. Aunt Rosemary answered it, and then called to Nancy,

“It’s for you.”

Nancy hurried to the hall, grabbed up the phone, and said, “Hello.” A moment later she cried out, “Dad! How wonderful to hear from you!”

Mr. Drew said that he had not found Willie Wharton and certain clues seemed to indicate that he was not in Chicago, but in some other city.

“I have a few other matters to take care of that will keep me here until tomorrow night. How are you getting along?”

“I haven’t solved the mystery yet,” his daughter reported. “We’ve had some more strange happenings. I’ll certainly be glad to see you here at Cliffwood. I know you can help me.”

“All right, I’ll come. But don’t try to meet me. The time is too uncertain, and as a matter of fact, I may find that I’ll have to stay here in Chicago.”

Mr. Drew said he would come out to the mansion by taxi. Briefly Nancy related her experiences at Twin Elms, and after a little more conversation, hung up. When she rejoined the others at the table, she told them about Mr. Drew’s promised visit.

“Oh, I’ll be so happy to meet your father,” said Miss Flora. “We may need legal advice in this mystery.”

There was a pause after this remark, with everyone silent for a few moments. Suddenly each one in the group looked at the others, startled. From somewhere upstairs came the plaintive strains of violin music. Had the radio been turned on again by the ghost?

Nancy dashed from the table to find out.

CHAPTER VH

Frightening Eyes

WITHIN five seconds Nancy had reached the second floor. The violin playing suddenly ceased.

She raced into Miss Flora's room, from which the sounds had seemed to come. The radio was not on. Quickly Nancy felt the instrument to see if it were even slightly warm to prove it had been in use.

"The music wasn't being played on this," she told herself, finding the radio cool.

As Nancy dashed from the room, she almost ran into Helen. "What did you find out?" her friend asked breathlessly.

"Nothing so far," Nancy replied, as she raced into Aunt Rosemary's bedroom to check the bedside radio in there.

This instrument, too, felt cool to the touch.

She and Helen stood in the center of the room, puzzled frowns creasing their foreheads. "There was music, wasn't there?" Helen questioned.

"I distinctly heard it," Nancy replied. "But where is the person who played the violin? Or put a disk on a record player, or turned on a hidden radio? Helen, I'm positive an intruder comes into this mansion by some secret entrance and tries to frighten us all."

"And succeeds," Helen answered. "It's positively eerie."

"And dangerous," Nancy thought.

"Let's continue our search right after breakfast tomorrow," Helen proposed.

"We will," Nancy responded. "But in the meantime I believe Miss Flora and Aunt Rosemary, to say nothing of ourselves, need some police protection."

"I think you're right," Helen agreed. "Let's go downstairs and suggest it to the others."

The girls returned to the first floor and Nancy told Mrs. Hayes and her mother of the failure to find the cause of the violin playing, and what she had in mind.

“Oh dear, the police will only laugh at us,” Miss Flora objected.

“Mother dear,” said her daughter, “the captain and his men didn’t believe us before because they thought we were imagining things. But Nancy and Helen heard music at two different times and they saw the chandelier rock. I’m sure that Captain Rossland will believe Nancy and send a guard out here.”

Nancy smiled at Miss Flora. “I shan’t ask the captain to believe in a ghost or even hunt for one. I think all we should request at the moment is that he have a man patrol the grounds here at night. I’m sure that we’re perfectly safe while we’re all awake, but I must admit I’d feel a little uneasy about going to bed wondering what that ghost may do next.”

Mrs. Turnbull finally agreed to the plan and Nancy went to the telephone. Captain Rossland readily agreed to send a man out a little later.

“He’ll return each night as long as you need him,” the officer stated. “And I’ll tell him not to ring the bell to tell you when he comes. If there is anyone who breaks into the mansion by a secret entrance, it would be much better if he does not know a guard is on duty.”

“I understand,” said Nancy.

When Miss Flora, her daughter, and the two girls went to bed, they were confident they would have a restful night. Nancy felt that if there was no disturbance, then it would indicate that the ghost’s means of entry into Twin Elms was directly from the outside. “In which case,” she thought, “it will mean he saw the guard and didn’t dare come inside the house.”

The young sleuth’s desire for a good night’s sleep was rudely thwarted as she awakened about midnight with a start. Nancy was sure she had heard a noise nearby. But now the house was quiet. Nancy listened intently, then finally got out of bed.

“Perhaps the noise I heard came from outdoors,” she told herself.

Tiptoeing to a window, so that she would not awaken Helen, Nancy peered out at the moonlit grounds. Shadows made by tree branches,

which swayed in a gentle breeze, moved back and forth across the lawn. The scent from a rose garden in full bloom was wafted to Nancy.

“What a heavenly night!” she thought.

Suddenly Nancy gave a start. A furtive figure had darted from behind a tree toward a clump of bushes. Was he the guard or the ghost? she wondered. As Nancy watched intently to see if she could detect any further movements of the mysterious figure, she heard padding footsteps in the hall. In a moment there was a loud knock on her door.

“Nancy! Wake up! Nancy! Come quick!”

The voice was Miss Flora’s, and she sounded extremely frightened. Nancy sped across the room, unlocked her door, and opened it wide. By this time Helen was awake and out of bed.

“What happened?” she asked sleepily.

Aunt Rosemary had come into the hall also. Her mother did not say a word; just started back toward her own bedroom. The others followed, wondering what they would find. Moonlight brightened part of the room, but the area near the hall was dark.

“There! Up there!” Miss Flora pointed to a corner of the room near the hall.

Two burning eyes looked down on the watchers!

Instantly Nancy snapped on the wall light and the group gazed upward at a large brown owl perched on the old-fashioned, ornamental picture molding.

“Oh!” Aunt Rosemary cried out. “How did that bird ever get in here?”

The others did not answer at once. Then Nancy, not wishing to frighten Miss Flora, remarked as casually as she could, “It probably came down the chimney.”

“But” Helen started to say.

Nancy gave her friend a warning wink and Helen did not finish the sentence. Nancy was sure she was going to say that the damper had been closed and the bird could not possibly have flown into the room from the chimney. Turning to Miss Flora, Nancy asked whether or not

her bedroom door had been locked.

“Oh, yes,” the elderly woman insisted. “I wouldn’t leave it unlocked for anything.”

Nancy did not comment. Knowing that Miss Flora was a bit forgetful, she thought it quite possible that the door had not been locked. An intruder had entered, let the owl fly to the picture molding, then made just enough noise to awaken the sleeping woman.

To satisfy her own memory about the damper, Nancy went over to the fireplace and looked inside. The damper was closed.

“But if the door to the hall was locked,” she reasoned, “then the ghost has some other way of getting into this room. And he escaped the detection of the guard.”

“I don’t want that owl in here all night,” Miss Flora broke into Nancy’s reverie. “We’ll have to get it out.”

“That’s not going to be easy,” Aunt Rosemary spoke up. “Owls have very sharp claws and beaks and they use them viciously on anybody who tries to disturb them. Mother, you come and sleep in my room the rest of the night. We’ll chase the owl out in the morning.”

Nancy urged Miss Flora to go with her daughter. “I’ll stay here and try getting Mr. Owl out of the house. Have you a pair of old heavy gloves?”

“I have some in my room,” Aunt Rosemary replied. “They’re thick leather. I use them for gardening.”

She brought them to Nancy, who put the gloves on at once. Then she suggested that Aunt Rosemary and her mother leave. Nancy smiled. “Helen and I will take over Operation Owl.”

As the door closed behind the two women. Nancy dragged a chair to the corner of the room beneath the bird. She was counting on the fact that the bright overhead light had dulled the owl’s vision and she would be able to grab it without too much trouble.

“Helen, will you open one of the screens, please?” she requested. “And wish me luck!”

“Don’t let that thing get loose,” Helen warned as she unfastened the screen and held it far out.

Nancy reached up and by stretching was just able to grasp the bird. In a lightning movement she had put her two hands around its body and imprisoned its claws. At once the owl began to bob its head and peck at her arms above the gloves. Wincing with pain, she stepped down from the chair and ran across the room.

The bird squirmed, darting its beak in first one direction, then another. But Nancy managed to hold the owl in such a position that most of the pecking missed its goal. She held the bird out the window, released it, and stepped back. Helen closed the screen and quickly fastened it.

“Oh!” Nancy said, gazing ruefully at her wrists which now showed several bloody digs from the owl’s beak. “I’m glad that’s over.”

“And I am too,” said Helen. “Let’s lock Miss Flora’s door from the outside, so that ghost can’t bring in any owls to the rest of us.”

Suddenly Helen grabbed Nancy’s arm. “I just thought of something,” she said. “There’s supposed to be a police guard outside. Yet the ghost got in here without being seen.”

“Either that, or there’s a secret entrance to this mansion which runs underground, probably to one of the outbuildings on the property.”

Nancy now told about the furtive figure she had seen dart from behind a tree. “I must find out right away if he was the ghost or the guard. I’ll do a little snooping around. It’s possible the guard didn’t show up.” Nancy smiled. “But if he did, and he’s any good, he’ll find me!”

“All right,” said Helen.. “But, Nancy, do be careful. You’re really taking awful chances to solve the mystery of Twin Elms.”

Nancy laughed softly as she walked back to the girls’ bedroom. She dressed quickly, then went downstairs, put the back-door key in her pocket, and let herself out of the house. Stealthily she went down the steps and glided to a spot back of some bushes.

Seeing no one around, she came from behind them and ran across the lawn to a large maple tree. She stood among the shadows for several moments, then darted out toward a building which in Colonial times had been used as the kitchen.

Halfway there, she heard a sound behind her and turned. A man stood in the shadows not ten feet away. Quick as a wink one hand flew to a holster on his hip.

“Halt!” he commanded.

CHAPTER VIII

A Startling Plunge

NANCY halted as directed and stood facing the man. “Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m a police guard, miss,” the man replied. “Just call me Patrick, And who are you?”

Quickly Nancy explained and then asked to see his identification. He opened his coat, pulled out a leather case, and showed her his shield proving that he was a plain-clothes man. His name was Tom Patrick.

“Have you seen anyone prowling around the grounds?” Nancy asked him.

“Not a soul, miss. This place has been quieter than a cemetery tonight.”

When the young sleuth told him about the furtive figure she had seen from the window, the detective laughed. “I believe you saw me,” he said. “I guess I’m not so good at hiding as I thought I was.”

Nancy laughed lightly. “Anyway, you soon nabbed me,” she told him.

The two chatted for several minutes. Tom Patrick told Nancy that people in Cliffwood regarded Mrs. Turnbull as being a little queer. They said that if she thought her house was haunted, it was all in line with the stories of the odd people who had lived there from tune to time during the past hundred years or so.

“Would this rumor make the property difficult to sell?” Nancy questioned the detective.

“It certainly would.”

Nancy said she thought the whole thing was a shame. “Mrs. Turnbull is one of the loveliest women I’ve ever met and there’s not a thing the matter with her, except that once in a while she is forgetful.”

“You don’t think that some of these happenings we’ve heard about are just pure imagination?” Tom Patrick asked.

“No, I don’t.”

Nancy now told him about the owl in Miss Flora's bedroom. "The door was locked, every screen was fastened, and the damper in the chimney closed. You tell me how the owl got in there."

Tom Patrick's eyes opened wide. "You say this happened only a little while ago?" he queried. When Nancy nodded, he added, "Of course I can't be everywhere on these grounds at once, but I've been round and round the building. I've never stopped walking since I arrived. I don't see how anyone could have gotten inside that mansion without my seeing him."

"I'll tell you my theory," said Nancy. "I believe there's a secret underground entrance from some other place on the grounds. It may be in one of these outbuildings. Anyway, tomorrow morning I'm going on a search for it."

"Well, I wish you luck," Tom Patrick said. "And if anything happens during the night, I'll let you know."

Nancy pointed to a window on the second floor. "That's my room," she said. "If you don't have a chance to use the door knocker, just throw a stone up against the screen to alert me. I'll wake up instantly, I know."

The guard promised to do this and Nancy went back into the mansion. She climbed the stairs and for a second time that night undressed. Helen had already gone back to sleep, so Nancy crawled into the big double bed noiselessly.

The two girls awoke the next morning about the same time and immediately Helen asked for full details of what Nancy had learned outdoors the night before. After hearing how her friend had been stopped by the guard, she shivered.

"You might have been in real danger, Nancy, not knowing who he was. You must be more careful. Suppose that man had been the ghost?"

Nancy laughed but made no reply. The girls went downstairs and started to prepare breakfast. In a few minutes Aunt Rosemary and her mother joined them.

"Did you find out anything more last night?" Mrs. Hayes asked Nancy.

"Only that a police guard named Tom Patrick is on duty," Nancy answered.

As soon as breakfast was over, the young sleuth announced that she was about to investigate all the outbuildings on the estate.

“I’m going to search for an underground passage leading to the mansion. It’s just possible that we hear no hollow sounds when we tap the walls, because of double doors or walls where the entrance is.”

Aunt Rosemary looked at Nancy intently. “You are a real detective, Nancy. I see now why Helen wanted us to ask you to find our ghost.”

Nancy’s eyes twinkled. “I may have some instinct for sleuthing,” she said, “but unless I can solve this mystery, it won’t do any of us much good.”

Turning to Helen, she suggested that they put on the old clothes they had brought with them.

Attired in sport shirts and jeans, the girls left the house. Nancy led the way first to the old icehouse. She rolled back the creaking, sliding door and gazed within. The tall, narrow building was about ten feet square. On one side were a series of sliding doors, one above the other.

“I’ve heard Miss Flora say,” Helen spoke up, “that in days gone by huge blocks of ice were cut from the river when it was frozen over and dragged here on a sledge. The blocks were stored here and taken off from the top down through these various sliding doors.”

“That story rather rules out the possibility of any underground passage leading from this building,” said Nancy. “I presume there was ice in here most of the year.”

The floor was covered with dank sawdust, and although Nancy was sure she would find nothing of interest beneath it, still she decided to take a look. Seeing an old, rusted shovel in one corner, she picked it up and began to dig. There was only dirt beneath the sawdust.

“Well, that clue fizzled out,” Helen remarked, as she and Nancy started for the next building.

This had once been used as a smokehouse. It, too, had an earthen floor. In one corner was a small fireplace, where smoldering fires of hickory wood had once burned. The smoke had curled up a narrow chimney to the second floor, which was windowless.

“Rows and rows of huge chunks of pork hung up there on hooks to be

smoked," Helen explained, "and days later turned into luscious hams and bacon."

There was no indication of a secret opening and Nancy went outside the small, two-story, peak-roofed structure and walked around. Up one side of the brick building and leading to a door above were the remnants of a ladder. Now only the sidepieces which had held the rungs remained.

"Give me a boost, will you, Helen?" Nancy requested. "I want to take a look inside."

Helen squatted on the ground and Nancy climbed to her shoulders. Then Helen, bracing her hands against the wall,, straightened up. Nancy opened the half-rotted wooden door.

"No ghost here!" she announced.

Nancy jumped to the ground and started for the servants' quarters. But a thorough inspection of this brick-and-wood structure failed to reveal a clue to a secret passageway.

There was only one outbuilding left to investigate, which Helen said was the old carriage house. This was built of brick and was fairly large. No carriages stood on its wooden floor, but around the walls hung old harnesses and reins. Nancy paused a moment to examine one of the bridles. It was set with two hand-painted medallions of women's portraits.

Suddenly her reflection was interrupted by a scream. Turning, she was just in time to see Helen plunge through a hole in the floor. In a flash Nancy was across the carriage house and looking down into a gaping hole where the rotted floor had given way.

"Helen!" she cried out in alarm.

"I'm all right," came a voice from below. "Nice and soft down here. Please throw me your flash."

Nancy removed the flashlight from the pocket of her jeans and tossed it down.

"I thought maybe I'd discovered something," Helen said. "But this is just a plain old hole. Give me a hand, will you, so I can climb up?"

Nancy lay flat on the floor and with one arm grabbed a supporting

beam that stood in the center of the carriage house. Reaching down with the other arm, she assisted Helen in her ascent.

“We’d better watch our step around here,” Nancy said as her friend once more stood beside her.

“You’re so right,” Helen agreed, brushing dirt off her jeans. Helen’s plunge had given Nancy an idea that there might be other openings in the floor and that one of them could be an entrance to a subterranean passage. But though she flashed her light over every inch of the carriage-house floor, she could discover nothing suspicious.

“Let’s quit!” Helen suggested. “I’m a mess, and besides, I’m hungry.”

“All right,” Nancy agreed. “Are you game to search the cellar this afternoon?”

“Oh, sure.”

After lunch they started to investigate the storerooms in the cellar. There was a cool stone room where barrels of apples had once been kept. There was another, formerly filled with bags of whole-wheat flour, barley, buckwheat, and oatmeal.

“And everything was grown on the estate,” said Helen.

“Oh, it must have been perfectly wonderful,” Nancy said. “I wish we could go back in time and see how life was in those days!”

“Maybe if we could, we’d know how to find that ghost,” Helen remarked. Nancy thought so too.

As the girls went from room to room in the cellar, Nancy beamed her flashlight over every inch of wall and floor. At times, the young sleuth’s pulse would quicken when she thought she had discovered a trap door or secret opening. But each time she had to admit failurethere was no evidence of either one in the cellar.

“This has been a discouraging day,” Nancy remarked, sighing. “But I’m not giving up.”

Helen felt sorry for her friend. To cheer Nancy, she said with a laugh, “Storeroom after storeroom but no room to store a ghost!”

Nancy had to laugh, and together the two girls ascended the stairway to the kitchen. After changing their clothes, they helped Aunt

Rosemary prepare the evening dinner. When the group had eaten and later gathered in the parlor, Nancy reminded the others that she expected her father to arrive the next day.

“Dad didn’t want me to bother meeting him, but I just can’t wait to see him. I think I’ll meet all the trains from Chicago that stop here.”

“I hope your father will stay with us for two or three days,” Miss Flora spoke up. “Surely he’ll have some ideas about our ghost.”

“And good ones, too,” Nancy said. “If he’s on the early train, he’ll have breakfast with us. I’ll meet it at eight o’clock.”

But later that evening Nancy’s plans were suddenly changed. Hannah Gruen telephoned her to say that a man at the telegraph office had called the house a short time before to read a message from Mr. Drew. He had been unavoidably detained and would not arrive Wednesday.

“In the telegram your father said that he will let us know when he will arrive,” the housekeeper added.

“I’m disappointed,” Nancy remarked, “but I hope this delay means that Dad is on the trail of Willie Wharton!”

“Speaking of Willie Wharton,” said Hannah, “I heard something about him today.”

“What was that?” Nancy asked.

“That he was seen down by the river right here in River Heights a couple of days ago!”

CHAPTER IX

A Worrisome Delay

"You say Willie Wharton was seen in River Heights down by the river?" Nancy asked unbelievingly.

"Yes," Hannah replied. "I learned it from our postman, Mr. Ritter, who is one of the people that sold property to the railroad. As you know, Nancy, Mr. Ritter is very honest and reliable. Well, he said he'd heard that some of the property owners were trying to horn in on this deal of Willie Wharton's for getting more money. But Mr. Ritter wouldn't have a thing to do with itcalls it a holdup."

"Did Mr. Ritter himself see Willie Wharton?" Nancy asked eagerly.

"No," the housekeeper replied. "One of the other property, owners told him Willie was around."

"That man could be mistaken," Nancy suggested.

"Of course he might," Hannah agreed. "And I'm inclined to think he is. If your father is staying over in Chicago, it must be because of Willie Wharton."

Nancy did not tell Hannah what was racing through her mind. She said good night cheerfully, but actually she was very much worried.

"Maybe Willie Wharton was seen down by the river," she mused. "And maybe Dad was 'unavoidably detained' by an enemy of his in connection with the railroad bridge project. One of the dissatisfied property owners might have followed him to Chicago."

Or, she reflected further, it was not inconceivable that Mr. Drew had found Willie Wharton, only to have Willie hold the lawyer a prisoner.

As Nancy sat lost in anxious thought, Helen came into the hall. "Something the matter?" she asked.

"I don't know," Nancy replied, "but I have a feeling there is. Dad telegraphed to say that he wouldn't be here tomorrow. Instead of wiring, he always phones me or Hannah or his office when he is away and it seems strange that he didn't do so this time."

"You told me a few days ago that your father had been threatened,"

said Helen. “Are you afraid it has something to do with that?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Helen offered.

“Thank you, Helen, but I think not. There isn’t anything I can do either. We’ll just have to wait and see what happens. Maybe I’ll hear from Dad again.”

Nancy looked so downcast that Helen searched her mind to find something which would cheer her friend. Suddenly Helen had an idea and went to speak to Miss Flora and Aunt Rosemary about it.

“I think it’s a wonderful plan if Nancy will do it,” Aunt Rosemary said.

Helen called Nancy from the hall and proposed that they all go to the attic to look in the big trunk containing the old costumes.

“We might even put them on,” Miss Flora proposed, smiling girlishly.

“And you girls could dance the minuet,” said Aunt Rosemary enthusiastically. “Mother plays the old spinet very well. Maybe she would play a minuet for you.”

“I love your idea,” said Nancy. She knew that the three were trying to boost her spirits and she appreciated it. Besides, what they had proposed sounded like fun.

All of them trooped up the creaky attic stairs. In their haste, none of the group had remembered to bring flashlights.

“I’ll go downstairs and get a couple,” Nancy offered.

“Never mind,” Aunt Rosemary spoke up.

“There are some candles and holders right here. We keep them for emergencies.”

She lighted two white candles which stood in old-fashioned, saucer-type brass holders and led the way to the costume trunk.

As Helen lifted the heavy lid, Nancy exclaimed in delight, “How beautiful the clothes are!”

She could see silks, satins, and laces at one side. At the other was a folded-up rose velvet robe. She and Helen lifted out the garments and

held them up.

“They’re really lovelier than our formal dance clothes today,” Helen remarked. “Especially the men’s!”

Miss Flora smiled. “And a lot more flattering!”

The entire trunk was unpacked, before the group selected what they would wear.

“This pale-green silk gown with the panniers would look lovely on you, Nancy,” Miss Flora said. “And I’m sure it’s just the right size, too.”

Nancy surveyed the tiny waist of the ball gown. “I’ll try it on,” she said. Then laughingly she added, “But I’ll probably have to hold my breath to close it in the middle. My, but the women in olden times certainly had slim waistlines!”

Helen was holding up a man’s purple velvet suit. It had knee breeches and the waistcoat had a lace-ruffled front. There were a tricorn hat, long white stockings, and buckled slippers to complete the costume.

“I think I’ll wear this and be your partner, Nancy,” Helen said.

Taking off her pumps, she slid her feet into the buckled slippers. The others laughed aloud. A man with a foot twice the size of Helen’s had once worn the slippers!

“Never mind. I’ll stuff the empty space with paper,” Helen announced gaily.

Miss Flora and Aunt Rosemary selected gowns for themselves, then opened a good-sized box at the bottom of the trunk. It contained various kinds of wigs worn in Colonial times. All were pure white and fluffy.

Carrying the costumes and wigs, the group descended to their bedrooms, where they changed into the fancy clothes, then went to the first floor. Miss Flora led the way into the room across the hall from the parlor. She said it once had been the drawing room. Later it had become a library, but the old spinet still stood in a corner.

Miss Flora sat down at the instrument and began to play Beethoven’s “Minuet.” Aunt Rosemary sat down beside her.

Nancy and Helen, dubbed by the latter, Master and Mistress Colonial America, began to dance. They clasped their right hands high in the air, then took two steps backward and made little bows. They circled, then strutted, and even put in a few steps with which no dancers in Colonial times would have been familiar.

Aunt Rosemary giggled and clapped. “I wish President Washington would come to see you,” she said, acting out her part in the entertainment. “Mistress Nancy, prithee do an encore and Master Corning, wilt thou accompany thy fair lady?”

The girls could barely keep from giggling. Helen made a low bow to her aunt, her tricorn in her hand, and said, “At your service, my lady. Your every wish is my command!”

The minuet was repeated, then as Miss Flora stopped playing, the girls sat down.

“Oh, that was such fun!” said Nancy. “Some time I’d like to Listen!” she commanded suddenly.

From outside the house they could hear loud shouting. “Come here! You in the house! Come here!”

Nancy and Helen dashed from their chairs to the front door. Nancy snapped on the porch light and the two girls raced outside.

“Over here!” a man’s voice urged.

Nancy and Helen ran down the steps and out onto the lawn. Just ahead of them stood Tom Patrick, the police detective. In a viselike grip he was holding a thin, bent-over man whom the girls judged to be about fifty years of age.

“Is this your ghost?” the guard asked.

His prisoner was struggling to free himself but was unable to get loose. The girls hurried forward to look at the man.

“I caught him sneaking along the edge of the grounds,” Tom Patrick announced.

“Let me go!” the man cried out angrily. “I’m no ghost. What are you talking about?”

“You may not be a ghost,” the detective said, “but you could be the

thief who has been robbing this house."

"What?" his prisoner exclaimed. "I'm no thief I live around here. Anyone will tell you I'm okay."

"What's your name and where do you live?" the detective prodded. He let the man stand up straight but held one of his arms firmly.

"My name's Albert Watson and I live over on Tuttle Road."

"What were you doing on this property?"

Albert Watson said he had been taking a short cut home. His wife had taken their car for the evening.

"I'd been to a friend's house. You can call him and verify what I'm saying. And you can call my wife, too. Maybe she's home now and she'll come and get me."

The guard reminded Albert Watson that he had not revealed why he was sneaking along the ground.

"Well," the prisoner said, "it was because of you. I heard downtown that there was a detective patrolling this place and I didn't want to bump into you. I was afraid of just what did happen."

The man relaxed a little. "I guess you're a pretty good guard at that."

Detective Patrick let go of Albert Watson's arm. "Your story sounds okay, but we'll go in the house and do some telephoning to find out if you're telling the truth."

"You'll find out all right. Why, I'm even a notary public! They don't give a notary's license to dishonest folks!" the trespasser insisted, Then he stared at Nancy and Helen, "What are you doing in those funny clothes?"

"Wearewe were having a little costume party," Helen responded. In the excitement she and Nancy had forgotten what they were wearing!

The two girls started for the house, with the men following. When Mr. Watson and the guard saw Miss Flora and Aunt Rosemary also in costume they gazed at the women in amusement.

Nancy introduced Mr. Watson. Miss Flora said she knew of him, although she had never met the man. Two phone calls by the guard confirmed Watson's story. In a little while his wife arrived at Twin

Elms to drive her husband home, and Detective Patrick went back to his guard duty.

Aunt Rosemary then turned out all the lights on the first floor and she, Miss Flora, and the girls went upstairs. Bedroom doors were locked, and everyone hoped there would be no disturbance during the night

“It was a good day, Nancy,” said Helen, yawning, as she climbed into bed.

“Yes, it was,” said Nancy. “Of course, I’m a little disappointed that we aren’t farther along solving the mystery but maybe by this time tomorrow” She looked toward Helen who did not answer. She was already sound asleep.

Nancy herself was under the covers a few minutes later. She lay staring at the ceiling, going over the various events of the past two days. As her mind recalled the scene in the attic when they were pulling costumes from the old trunk, she suddenly gave a start.

“That section of wall back of the trunk!” she told herself. “The paneling looked different somehow from the rest of the attic wall. Maybe it’s movable and leads to a secret exit! Tomorrow I’ll find out!”

CHAPTER X

The Midnight Watch

As SOON as the two girls awoke the next morning, Nancy told Helen her plan.

“I’m with you,” said Helen. “Oh, I do wish we could solve the mystery of the ghost! I’m afraid that it’s beginning to affect Miss Flora’s health and yet she won’t leave Twin Elms.”

“Maybe we can get Aunt Rosemary to keep her in the garden most of the day,” Nancy suggested. “It’s perfectly beautiful outside. We might even serve lunch under the trees.”

“I’m sure they’d love that,” said Helen. “As soon as we get downstairs, let’s propose it.”

Both women liked the suggestion. Aunt Rosemary had guessed their strategy and was appreciative of it.

“I’ll wash and dry the dishes,” Nancy offered when breakfast was over. “Miss Flora, why don’t you and Aunt Rosemary go outside right now and take advantage of this lovely sunshine?”

The frail, elderly woman smiled. There were deep circles under her eyes, indicating that she had had a sleepless night.

“And I’ll run the vacuum cleaner around and dust this first floor in less than half an hour,” Helen said merrily.

Her relatives caught the spirit of her enthusiasm and Miss Flora remarked, “I wish you girls lived here all the time. Despite our troubles, you have brought a feeling of gaiety back into our lives.”

Both girls smiled at the compliment. As soon as the two women had gone outdoors, the girls set to work with a will. At the end of the allotted half hour, the first floor of the mansion was spotless. Nancy and Helen next went to the second floor, quickly made the beds, and tidied the bathrooms.

“And now for that ghost!” said Helen, brandishing her flashlight.

Nancy took her own from a bureau drawer.

“Let’s see if we can figure out how to climb these attic stairs without making them creak,” Nancy suggested. “Knowing how may come in handy some time.”

This presented a real challenge. Every inch of each step was tried before the girls finally worked out a pattern to follow in ascending the stairway noiselessly.

Helen laughed, “This will certainly be a memory test, Nancy. I’ll rehearse our directions. First step, put your foot to the left near the wall. Second step, right center. Third step, against the right wall. I’ll need three feet to do that!”

Nancy laughed too. “For myself, I think I’ll skip the second step. Let’s see. On the fourth and fifth it’s all right to step in the center, but on the sixth you hug the left wall, on the seventh, the right wall”

Helen interrupted. “But if you step on the eighth any place, it will creak. So you skip it.”

“Nine, ten, and eleven are okay,” Nancy recalled. “But from there to fifteen at the top we’re in trouble.”

“Let’s see if I remember,” said Helen. “On twelve, you go left, then right, then right again. How can you do that without a jump and losing your balance and tumbling down?”

“How about skipping fourteen and then stretching as far as you can to reach the top one at the left where it doesn’t squeak,” Nancy replied. “Let’s go!”

She and Helen went back to the second floor and began what was meant to be a silent ascent. But both of them made so many mistakes at first the creaking was terrific. Finally, however, the girls had the silent spots memorized perfectly and went up noiselessly.

Nancy clicked on her flashlight and swung it onto the nearest wood-paneled wall. Helen stared at it, then remarked, “This isn’t made of long panels from ceiling to floor. It’s built of small pieces.”

“That’s right,” said Nancy. “But see if you don’t agree with me that the spot back of the costume trunk near the chimney looks a little different. The grain doesn’t match the other wood.”

The girls crossed the attic and Nancy beamed her flashlight over the suspected paneling.

“It does look different,” Helen said. “This could be a door, I suppose. But there’s no knob or other hardware on it.” She ran her finger over a section just above the floor, following the cracks at the edge of a four-by-two-and-a-half-foot space.

“If it’s a secret door,” said Nancy, “the knob is on the other side.”

“How are we going to open it?” Helen questioned.

“We might try prying the door open,” Nancy proposed. “But first I want to test it.”

She tapped the entire panel with her knuckles. A look of disappointment came over her face. “There’s certainly no hollow space behind it,” she said.

“Let’s make sure,” said Helen. “Suppose I go downstairs and get a screw driver and hammer? We’ll see what happens when we drive the screw driver through this crack.”

“Good idea, Helen.”

While she was gone, Nancy inspected the rest of the attic walls and floor. She did not find another spot which seemed suspicious. By this time Helen had returned with the tools. Inserting the screw driver into one of the cracks, she began to pound on the handle of it with the hammer.

Nancy watched hopefully. The screw driver went through the crack very easily but immediately met an obstruction on the other side. Helen pulled the screw driver out. “Nancy, you try your luck.”

The young sleuth picked a different spot, but the results were the same. There was no open space behind that portion of the attic wall.

“My hunch wasn’t so good,” said Nancy.

Helen suggested that they give up and go downstairs. “Anyway, I think the postman will be here soon.” She smiled. “I’m expecting a letter from Jim. Mother said she would forward all my mail.”

Nancy did not want to give up the search yet. But she nodded in agreement and waved her friend toward the stairs. Then the young detective sat down on the floor and cupped her chin in her hands. As she stared ahead, Nancy noticed that Helen, in her eagerness to meet the postman, had not bothered to go quietly down the attic steps. It

sounded as if Helen had picked the squeakiest spot on each step!

Nancy heard Helen go out the front door and suddenly realized that she was in the big mansion all alone. “That may bring the ghost on a visit,” she thought. “If he is around, he may think I went outside with Helen! And I may learn where the secret opening is!”

Nancy sat perfectly still, listening intently. Suddenly she flung her head up. Was it her imagination, or did she hear the creak of steps? She was not mistaken. Nancy strained her ears, trying to determine from where the sounds were coming.

“I’m sure they’re not from the attic stairs or the main staircase. And not the back stairway. Even if the ghost was in the kitchen and unlocked the door to the second floor, he’d know that the one at the top of the stairs was locked from the other side.”

Nancy’s heart suddenly gave a leap. She was positive that the creaking sounds were coming from somewhere behind the attic wall!

“A secret staircase!” she thought excitedly. “Maybe the ghost is entering the second floor!”

Nancy waited until the sounds stopped, then she got to her feet, tiptoed noiselessly down the attic steps and looked around. She could hear nothing. Was the ghost standing quietly in one of the bedrooms? Probably Miss Flora’s?

Treading so lightly that she did not make a sound, Nancy peered into each room as she reached it. But no one was in any of them.

“Maybe he’s on the first floor!” Nancy thought.

She descended the main stairway, hugging the wall so she would not make a sound. Reaching the first floor, Nancy peered into the parlor. No one was there. She looked in the library, the dining room, and the kitchen. She saw no one.

“Well, the ghost didn’t come into the house after all,” Nancy concluded. “He may have intended to, but changed his mind.”

She felt more certain than at any time, however, that there was a secret entrance to Twin Elms Mansion from a hidden stairway. But how to find it? Suddenly the young sleuth snapped her fingers. “I know what I’ll do! I’ll set a trap for that ghost!”

She reflected that he had taken jewelry, but those thefts had stopped. Apparently he was afraid to go to the second floor.

“I wonder if anything is missing from the first floor,” she mused. “Maybe he has taken silverware or helped himself to some food.”

Going to the back door, Nancy opened it and called to Helen, who was now seated in the garden with Miss Flora and Aunt Rosemary. “What say we start lunch?” she called, not wishing to distress Miss Flora by bringing up the subject of the mystery.

“Okay,” said Helen. In a few moments she joined Nancy, who asked if her friend had received a letter.

Helen’s eyes sparkled. “I sure did. Oh, Nancy, I can hardly wait for Jim to get home!”

Nancy smiled. “The way you describe him, I can hardly wait to see him myself.” Then she told Helen the real reason she had called her into the kitchen. She described the footsteps on what she was sure was a hidden, creaking stairway, then added, “If we discover that food or something else is missing we’ll know he’s been here again.”

Helen offered to inspect the flat silver. “I know approximately how many pieces should be in the buffet drawer,” she said.

“And I’ll look over the food supplies,” Nancy suggested. “I have a pretty good idea what was in the refrigerator and on the pantry shelf.”

It was not many minutes before each of the girls discovered articles missing. Helen said that nearly a dozen teaspoons were gone and Nancy figured that several cans of food, some eggs, and a quart of milk had been taken.

“It just seems impossible to catch that thief,” Helen said with a sigh.

On a sudden hunch Nancy took down from the wall a memo pad and pencil which hung there. Putting a finger to her lips to indicate that Helen was not to comment, Nancy wrote on the sheet:

“I think the only way to catch the ghost is to trap him. I believe he has one or more microphones hidden some place and that he hears all our plans.”

Nancy looked up at Helen, who nodded silently. Nancy continued to write, “I don’t want to worry Miss Flora or Aunt Rosemary, so let’s

keep our plans a secret. I suggest that we go to bed tonight as usual and carry on a conversation about our plans for tomorrow. But actually we won't take off our clothes. Then about midnight let's tiptoe downstairs to watch. I'll wait in the kitchen. Do you want to stay in the living room?"

Again Helen nodded. Nancy, thinking that they had been quiet too long, and that if there was an eavesdropper nearby he might become suspicious, said aloud, "What would Miss Flora and Aunt Rosemary like for lunch, Helen?"

"Why, uh" Helen found it hard to transfer to the new subject. "Theyuhboth love soup."

"Then I'll make cream of chicken soup," said Nancy. "Hand me a can of chicken and rice, will you? And I'll get the milk."

As Helen was doing this, Nancy lighted a match, held her recently written note over the sink, and set fire to the paper.

Helen smiled. "Nancy thinks of everything," she said to herself.

The girls chatted gaily as they prepared the food and finally carried four trays out to the garden. They did not mention their midnight plan. The day in the garden was proving to be most beneficial to Miss Flora, and the girls were sure she would sleep well that night.

Nancy's plan was followed to the letter. Just as the grandfather clock in the hall was striking midnight, Nancy arrived in the kitchen and sat down to await developments. Helen was posted in a living-room chair near the hall doorway. Moonlight streamed into both rooms but the girls had taken seats in the shadows.

Helen was mentally rehearsing the further instructions which Nancy had written to her during the afternoon. The young sleuth had suggested that if Helen should see anyone, she was to run to the front door, open it, and yell "Police!" At the same time she was to try to watch where the intruder disappeared.

The minutes ticked by. There was not a sound in the house. Then suddenly Nancy heard the front door open with a bang and Helen's voice yell loudly and clearly:

"Police! Help! Police!"

CHAPTER XI

An Elusive Ghost

BY THE time Nancy reached the front hall, Tom Patrick, the police guard, had rushed into the house. “Here I am!” he called. “What’s the matter?”

Helen led the way into the living room, and switched on the chandelier light.

“That sofa next to the fireplace!” she said in a trembling voice. “It moved! I saw it move!”

“You mean somebody moved it?” the detective asked.

“II don’t know,” Helen replied. “I couldn’t see anybody.”

Nancy walked over to the old-fashioned sofa, set in the niche alongside the fireplace. Certainly the piece was in place now. If the ghost had moved it, he had returned the sofa to its original position.

“Let’s pull it out and see what we can find,” Nancy suggested.

She tugged at one end, while the guard pulled the other. It occurred to Nancy that a person who moved it alone would have to be very strong.

“Do you think your ghost came up through a trap door or something?” the detective asked.

Neither of the girls replied. They had previously searched the area, and even now as they looked over every inch of the floor and the three walls surrounding the high sides of the couch, they could detect nothing that looked like an opening.

By this time Helen looked sheepish. “II guess I was wrong,” she said finally. Turning to the police guard, she said, “I’m sorry to have taken you away from your work.”

“Don’t feel too badly about it. But I’d better get back to my guard duty,” the man said, and left the house.

“Oh, Nancy!” Helen cried out. “I’m so sorry!”

She was about to say more but Nancy put a finger to her lips. They could use the same strategy for trapping the thief at another time. In case the thief might be listening, Nancy did not want to give away their secret.

Nancy felt that after all the uproar the ghost would not appear again that night. She motioned to Helen that they would go quietly upstairs and get some sleep. Hugging the walls of the stairway once more, they ascended noiselessly, tiptoed to their room, and got into bed.

“I’m certainly glad I didn’t wake up Miss Flora and Aunt Rosemary,” said Helen sleepily as she whispered good night.

Though Nancy had been sure the ghost would not enter the mansion again that night, she discovered in the morning that she had been mistaken. More food had been stolen sometime between midnight and eight o’clock when she and Helen started breakfast. Had the ghost taken it for personal use or only to worry the occupants of Twin Elms?

“I missed my chance this time,” Nancy murmured to her friend. “After this, I’d better not trust what that ghost’s next move may be!”

At nine o’clock Hannah Gruen telephoned the house. Nancy happened to answer the ring and after the usual greetings was amazed to hear Hannah say, “I’d like to speak to your father.”

“Why, Dad isn’t here!” Nancy told her. “Don’t you rememberthe telegram said he wasn’t coming?”

“He’s not there!” Hannah exclaimed. “Oh, this is bad, Nancyvery bad.”

“What do you mean, Hannah?” Nancy asked fearfully.

The housekeeper explained that soon after receiving the telegram on Tuesday evening, Mr. Drew himself had phoned. “He wanted to know if you were still in Cliffwood, Nancy. When I told him yes, he said he would stop off there on his way home Wednesday.”

Nancy was frightened, but she asked steadily, “Hannah, did you happen to mention the telegram to him?”

“No, I didn’t,” the housekeeper replied. “I didn’t think it was necessary.”

“Hannah darling,” said Nancy, almost on the verge of tears, “I’m afraid that telegram was a hoax!”

“A hoax!” Mrs. Gruen cried out.

“Yes. Dad’s enemies sent it to keep me from meeting him!”

“Oh, Nancy,” Hannah wailed, “You don’t suppose those enemies that Mr. Comber warned you about have waylaid your father and are keeping him prisoner?”

“I’m afraid so,” said Nancy. Her knees began to quake and she sank into the chair alongside the telephone table.

“What’ll we do?” Hannah asked. “Do you want me to notify the police?”

“Not yet. Let me do a little checking first.”

“All right, Nancy. But let me know what happens.”

“I will.”

Nancy put the phone down, then looked at the various telephone directories which lay on the table. Finding one which contained River Heights numbers, she looked for the number of the telegraph office and put in a call. She asked the clerk who answered to verify that there had been a telegram from Mr. Drew on Tuesday.

After a few minutes wait, the reply came. “We have no record of such a telegram.”

Nancy thanked the clerk and hung up. By this time her hands were shaking with fright. What had happened to her father?

Getting control of herself, Nancy telephoned in turn to the airport, the railroad station, and the bus lines which served Cliffwood. She inquired about any accidents which might have occurred on trips from Chicago the previous day or on Tuesday night. In each case she was told there had been none.

“Oh, what shall I do?” Nancy thought in dismay.

Immediately an idea came to her and she put in a call to the Chicago hotel where her father had registered. Although she thought it unlikely, it was just possible that he had changed his mind again and was still there. But a conversation with the desk clerk dashed this hope.

“No, Mr. Drew is not here. He checked out Tuesday evening. I don’t

know his plans, but I'll connect you with the head porter. He may be able to help you."

In a few seconds Nancy was asking the porter what he could tell her to help clear up the mystery of her father's disappearance. "All I know, miss, is that your father told me he was taking a sleeper train and getting off somewhere Wednesday morning to meet his daughter."

"Thank you. Oh, thank you very much," said Nancy. "You've helped me a great deal."

So her father had taken the train home and probably had reached the Cliffwood station! Next she must find out what had happened to him after that!

Nancy told Aunt Rosemary and Helen what she had learned, then got in her convertible and drove directly to the Cliffwood station. There she spoke to the ticket agent. Unfortunately, he could not identify Mr. Drew from Nancy's description as having been among the passengers who got off either of the two trains arriving from Chicago on Wednesday.

Nancy went to speak to the taximen. Judging by the line of cabs, she decided that all the drivers who served the station were on hand at the moment. There had been no outgoing trains for nearly an hour and an incoming express was due in about fifteen minutes.

"I'm in luck," the young detective told herself. "Surely one of these men must have driven Dad."

She went from one to another, but each of them denied having carried a passenger of Mr. Drew's description the day before.

By this time Nancy was in a panic. She hurried inside the station to a telephone booth and called

the local police station. Nancy asked to speak to the captain and in a moment he came on the line.

"Captain Rossland speaking," he said crisply.

Nancy poured out her story. She told of the warning her father had received in River Heights and her fear that some enemy of his was now detaining the lawyer against his will.

"This is very serious, Miss Drew," Captain Rossland stated. "I will put

men on the case at once," he said.

As Nancy left the phone booth, a large, gray-haired woman walked up to her. "Pardon me, miss, but I couldn't help overhearing what you said. I believe maybe I can help you."

Nancy was surprised and slightly suspicious. Maybe this woman was connected with the abductors and planned to make Nancy a prisoner too by promising to take her to her father!

"Don't look so frightened," the woman said, smiling. "All I wanted to tell you is that I'm down here at the station every day to take a train to the next town. I'm a nurse and I'm on a case over there right now."

"I see," Nancy said.

"Well, yesterday I was here when the Chicago train came in. I noticed a tall, handsome mansuch as you describe your father to bestep off the train. He got into the taxi driven by a man named Harry. I have a feeling that for some reason the cabbie isn't telling the truth. Let's talk to him."

Nancy followed the woman, her heart beating furiously. She was ready to grab at any straw to get a clue to her father's whereabouts!

"Hello, Miss Skade," the taximan said. "How are you today?"

"Oh, I'm all right," the nurse responded. "Listen, Harry. You told this young lady that you didn't carry any passenger yesterday that looked like her father. Now I saw one get into your cab. What about it?"

Harry hung his head. "Listen, miss," he said to Nancy, "I got three kids and I don't want nothin' to happen to 'em. See?"

"What do you mean?" Nancy asked, puzzled.

When the man did not reply, Miss Skade said, "Now look, Harry. This girl's afraid that her father has been kidnapped. It's up to you to tell her all you know."

"Kidnapped!" the taximan shouted. "Oh, goodnight! Now I don't know what to do."

Nancy had a sudden thought. "Has somebody been threatening you, Harry?" she asked.

The cab driver's eyes nearly popped from his head. "Well," he said,

“since you’ve guessed it, I’d better tell you everything I know.”

He went on to say that he had taken a passenger who fitted Mr. Drew’s description toward Twin Elms where he had said he wanted to go. “Just as we were leaving the station, two other men came up and jumped into my cab. They said they were going a little farther than that and would I take them? Well, about halfway to Twin Elms, one of those men ordered me to pull up to the side of the road and stop. He told me the stranger had blacked out. He and his buddy jumped out of the car and laid the man on the grass.”

“How ill was he?” Nancy asked.

“I don’t know. He was unconscious. Just then another car came along behind us and stopped. The driver got out and offered to take your father to a hospital. The two men said okay.”

Nancy took heart. Maybe her father was in a hospital and had not been abducted at all But a moment later her hopes were again dashed when Harry said:

“I told those guys I’d be glad to drive the sick man to a hospital, but one of them turned on me, shook his fist, and yelled, ‘You just forget everything that’s happened or it’ll be too bad for you and your kids!’”

“Oh!” Nancy cried out. and for a second everything seemed to swim before her eyes. She clutched the door handle of the taxi for support.

There was no question now but that her father had been drugged, then kidnapped!

CHAPTER XII

The Newspaper Clue

Miss SKADE grabbed Nancy. “Do you feel ill?” the nurse asked quickly.

“Oh, I’ll be all right,” Nancy replied. “This news has been a great shock to me.”

“Is there any way I can help you?” the woman questioned. “I’d be very happy to.”

“Thank you, but I guess not,” the young sleuth said. Smiling ruefully, she added, “But I must get busy and do something about this.”

The nurse suggested that perhaps Mr. Drew was in one of the local hospitals. She gave Nancy the names of the three in town.

“I’ll get in touch with them at once,” the young detective said. “You’ve been most kind. And here comes your train, Miss Skade. Good-by and again thanks a million for your help!”

Harry climbed out of his taxi and went to stand at the platform to signal passengers for his cab. Nancy hurried after him, and before the train came in, asked if he would please give her a description of the two men who had been with her father.

“Well, both of them were dark and kind of athletic-looking. Not what I’d call handsome. One of ‘em had an upper tooth missing. And the other fellowhis left ear was kind of crinkled, if you know what I mean.”

“I understand,” said Nancy. “I’ll give a description of the two men to the police.”

She went back to the telephone booth and called each of the three hospitals, asking if anyone by the name of Carson Drew had been admitted or possibly a patient who was not conscious and had no identification. Only Mercy Hospital had a patient who had been unconscious since the day before. He definitely was not Mr. Drewhe was Chinese!

Sure now that her father was being held in some secret hiding place,

Nancy went at once to police headquarters and related the taximan's story.

Captain Rossland looked extremely concerned. "This is alarming, Miss Drew," he said, "but I feel sure we can trace that fellow with the crinkly ear and we'll make him tell us where your father is I doubt, though, that there is anything you can do. You'd better leave it to the police."

Nancy said nothing. She was reluctant to give up even trying to do something, but she acquiesced.

"In the meantime," said the officer, "I'd advise you to remain at Twin Elms and concentrate on solving the mystery there. From what you tell me about your father, I'm sure he'll be able to get out of the difficulty himself, even before the police find him."

Aloud, Nancy promised to stay on call in case Captain Rossland might need her. But in her own mind the young sleuth determined that if she got any kind of a lead concerning her father, she was most certainly going to follow it up.

Nancy left police headquarters and strolled up the street, deep in thought. "Instead of things getting better, all my problems seem to be getting worse. Maybe I'd better call Hannah."

Since she had been a little girl, Nancy had found solace in talking to Hannah Gruen. The housekeeper had always been able to give her such good advice!

Nancy went into a drugstore and entered one of the telephone booths. She called the Drew home in River Heights and was pleased when Mrs. Gruen answered. The housekeeper was aghast to learn Nancy's news but said she thought Captain Rossland's advice was sound.

"You've given the police the best leads in the world and I believe that's all you can do. But wait" the housekeeper suddenly said. "If I were you, Nancy, I'd call up those railroad lawyers and tell them exactly what has happened. Your father's disappearance is directly concerned with that bridge project, I'm sure, and the lawyers may have some ideas about where to find him."

"That's a wonderful suggestion, Hannah," said Nancy. "I'll call them right away."

But when the young detective phoned the railroad lawyers, she was

disappointed to learn that all the men were out to lunch and none of them would return before two o'clock.

"Oh dear!" Nancy sighed. "Well, I guess I'd better get a snack while waiting for them to come back." But in her worried state she did not feel like eating.

There was a food counter at the rear of the drugstore and Nancy made her way to it. Perching on a high-backed stool, she read the menu over and over. Nothing appealed to her. When the counterman asked her what she wanted, Nancy said frankly she did not knowshe was not very hungry-

"Then I recommend our split-pea soup," he told her. "It's homemade and out of this world." Nancy smiled at him. "I'll take your advice and try it."

The hot soup was delicious. By the time she had finished it, Nancy's spirits had risen considerably.

"And how about some custard pie?" the counterman inquired. "It's just like Mother used to make."

"All right," Nancy answered, smiling at the solicitous young man. The pie was ice cold and proved to be delicious. When Nancy finished eating it, she glanced at her wrist watch. It was only one-thirty. Seeing a rack of magazines, she decided to while away the time reading in her car.

She purchased a magazine of detective stories, one of which proved to be so intriguing that the half hour went by quickly. Promptly at two o'clock Nancy returned to the phone booth and called the offices of the railroad lawyers. The switchboard operator connected her with Mr. Anthony Barradale and Nancy judged from his voice that he was fairly young. Quickly she told her story.

"Mr. Drew being held a prisoner!" Mr. Barradale cried out. "Well, those underhanded property owners are certainly going to great lengths to gain a few dollars."

"The police are working on the case, but I thought perhaps your firm would like to take a hand also," Nancy told the lawyer.

"We certainly will," the young man replied. "I'll speak to our senior partner about it. I know he will want to start work at once on the case."

“Thank you,” said Nancy. She gave the address and telephone number of Twin Elms and asked that the lawyers get in touch with her there if any news should break.

“We’ll do that,” Mr. Barradale promised.

Nancy left the drugstore and walked back to her car. Climbing in, she wondered what her next move ought to be.

“One thing is sure,” she thought. “Work is the best antidote for worry. I’ll get back to Twin Elms and do some more sleuthing there.”

As she drove along, Nancy reflected about the ghost entering Twin Elms mansion by a subterranean passage. Since she had found no sign of one in any of the outbuildings on the estate, it occurred to her that possibly it led from an obscure cave, either natural or man-made. Such a device would be a clever artifice for an architect to use.

Taking a little-used road that ran along one side of the estate, Nancy recalled having seen a long, grassed-over hillock which she had assumed to be an old aqueduct. Perhaps this was actually the hidden entrance to Twin Elms!

She parked her car at the side of the road and took a flashlight from the glove compartment. In anticipation of finding the answer to the riddle, Nancy crossed the field, and as she came closer to the beginning of the huge mound, she could see stones piled up. Getting nearer, she realized that it was indeed the entrance to a rocky cave.

“Well, maybe this time I’ve found it!” she thought, hurrying forward.

The wind was blowing strongly and tossed her hair about her face. Suddenly a freakish gust swept a newspaper from among the rocks and scattered the pages helter-skelter.

Nancy was more excited than ever. The newspaper meant a human being had been there not too long ago! The front page sailed toward her. As she grabbed it up, she saw to her complete astonishment that the paper was a copy of the River Heights Gazette. The date was the Tuesday before.

“Someone interested in River Heights has been here very recently!” the young sleuth said to herself excitedly.

Who was the person? Her father? Comber? Who?

Wondering if the paper might contain any clue, Nancy dashed around to pick up all the sheets. As she spread them out on the ground, she noticed a hole in the page where classified ads appeared.

“This may be a very good clue!” Nancy thought. “As soon as I get back to the house, I’ll call Hannah and have her look up Tuesday’s paper to see what was in that ad.”

It suddenly occurred to Nancy that the person who had brought the paper to the cave might be inside at this very moment. She must watch her step; he might prove to be an enemy!

“This may be where Dad is being held a prisoner!” Nancy thought wildly.

Flashlight in hand, and her eyes darting intently about, Nancy proceeded cautiously into the cave. Five feet, ten. She saw no one. Fifteen more. Twenty. Then Nancy met a dead end. The empty cave was almost completely round and had no other opening,

“Oh dear, another failure,” Nancy told herself disappointedly, as she retraced her steps. “My only hope now is to learn something important from the ad in the paper.”

Nancy walked back across the field. Her eyes were down, as she automatically looked for footprints. But presently she looked up and stared in disbelief.

A man was standing alongside her car, examining it. His back was half turned toward Nancy, so she could not see his face very well. But he had an athletic build and his left ear was definitely crinkly!

CHAPTER XIH

The Cash

THE STRANGER inspecting Nancy's car must have heard her coming. Without turning around, he dodged back of the automobile and started off across the field in the opposite direction.

"He certainly acts suspiciously. He must be the man with the crinkly ear who helped abduct my father!" Nancy thought excitedly.

Quickly she crossed the road and ran after him as fast as she could, hoping to overtake him. But the man had had a good head start. Also, his stride was longer than Nancy's and he could cover more ground in the same amount of time.

The far corner of the irregular-shaped field ended at the road on which Riverview Manor stood. When Nancy reached the highway, she was just in time to see the stranger leap into a parked car and drive off.

The young detective was exasperated. She had had only a glimpse of the man's profile. If only she could have seen him full face or caught the license number of his car!

"I wonder if he's the one who dropped the newspaper?" she asked herself. "Maybe he's from River Heights!" She surmised that the man himself was not one of the property owners but he might have been hired by Willie Wharton or one of the owners to help abduct Mr. Drew.

"I'd better hurry to a phone and report this," Nancy thought.

She ran all the way back across the field, stepped into her own car, turned it around, and headed for Twin Elms. When Nancy arrived, she sped to the telephone in the hall and dialed Cliffwood Police Headquarters. In a moment she was talking to the captain and gave him her latest information.

"It certainly looks as if you picked up a good clue, Miss Drew," the officer remarked. "I'll send out an alarm immediately to have this man picked up."

"I suppose there is no news of my father," Nancy said.

“I’m afraid not. But a couple of our men talked to the taxi driver Harry and he gave us a pretty good description of the man who came along the road while your father was lying unconscious on the grassthe one who offered to take him to the hospital.”

“What did he look, like?” Nancy asked.

The officer described the man as being in his early fifties, short, and rather heavy-set. He had shifty pale-blue eyes.

“Well,” Nancy replied, “I can think of several men who would fit that description. Did he have any outstanding characteristics?”

“Harry didn’t notice anything, except that the fellow’s hands didn’t look as if he did any kind of physical work. The taximan said they were kind of soft and pudgy.”

“Well, that eliminates all the men I know who are short, heavy-set and have pale-blue eyes. None of them has hands like that.”

“It’ll be a great identifying feature,” the police officer remarked. “Well, I guess I’d better get that alarm out.”

Nancy said good-by and put down the phone. She waited several seconds for the line to clear, then picked up the instrument again and called Hannah Gruen. Before Nancy lay the sheet of newspaper from which the advertisement had been torn.

“The Drew residence,” said a voice on the phone.

“Hello, Hannah. This is Nancy.”

“How are you, dear? Any news?” Mrs. Gruen asked quickly.

“I haven’t found Dad yet,” the young detective replied. “And the police haven’t either. But I’ve picked up a couple of clues.”

“Tell me about them,” the housekeeper requested excitedly.

Nancy told her about the man with the crinkly ear and said she was sure that the police would soon capture him. “If he’ll only talk, we may find out where Dad is being held.”

“Oh, I hope so!” Hannah sighed. “Don’t get discouraged, Nancy.”

At this point Helen came into the hall, and as she passed Nancy on her way to the stairs, smiled at her friend. The young sleuth was about to

ask Hannah to get the Drews' Tuesday copy of the River Heights Gazette when she heard a cracking noise overhead. Immediately she decided the ghost might be at work again.

"Hannah, I'll call you back later," Nancy said and put down the phone.

She had no sooner done this than Helen screamed, "Nancy, run! The ceiling!" She herself started for the front door.

Nancy, looking up, saw a tremendous crack in the ceiling just above the girls' heads. The next instant the whole ceiling crashed down on them! They were thrown to the floor.

"Oh!" Helen moaned. She was covered with lath and plaster, and had been hit hard on the head. But she managed to call out from under the debris, "Nancy, are you all right?" There was no answer.

The tremendous noise had brought Miss Flora and Aunt Rosemary on a run from the kitchen. They stared in horror at the scene before them. Nancy lay unconscious and Helen seemed too dazed to move.

"Oh my! Oh my!" Miss Flora exclaimed.

She and Aunt Rosemary began stepping over the lath and plaster, which by now had filled the air with dust. They sneezed again and again but made their way forward nevertheless.

Miss Flora, reaching Helen's side, started pulling aside chunks of broken plaster and lath. Finally, she helped her great-granddaughter to her feet.

"Oh, my dear, you're hurt!" she said solicitously.

"I'llbeall rightin a minute," Helen insisted, choking with the dust. "But Nancy"

Aunt Rosemary had already reached the unconscious girl. With lightning speed, she threw aside the debris which almost covered Nancy. Whipping a handkerchief from her pocket, she gently laid it over Nancy's face, so that she would not breathe in any more of the dust.

"Helen, do you feel strong enough to help me carry Nancy into the library?" she asked. "I'd like to lay her on the couch there."

“Oh, yes, Aunt Rosemary. Do you think Nancy is badly hurt?” she asked worriedly.

“I hope not.”

At this moment Nancy stirred. Then her arm moved upward and she pulled the handkerchief from her face. She blinked several times as if unable to recall where she was.

“You’ll be all right, Nancy,” said Aunt Rosemary kindly. “But I don’t want you to breathe this dust. Please keep the handkerchief over your nose.” She took it from Nancy’s hand and once more laid it across the girl’s nostrils and mouth.

In a moment Nancy smiled wanly. “I remember now. The ceiling fell down.”

“Yes,” said Helen. “It knocked you out for a few moments. I hope you’re not hurt.”

Miss Flora, who was still sneezing violently, insisted that they all get out of the dust at once. She began stepping across the piles of debris, with Helen helping her. When they reached the library door, the elderly woman went inside.

Helen returned to help Nancy. But by this time her friend was standing up, leaning on Aunt Rosemary’s arm. She was able to make her way across the hall to the library. Aunt Rosemary suggested calling a doctor, but Nancy said this would not be necessary.

“I’m so thankful you girls weren’t seriously hurt,” Miss Flora said. “What a dreadful thing this is! Do you think the ghost is responsible?”

Her daughter replied at once. “No, I don’t. Mother, you will recall that for some time we have had a leak in the hall whenever it rained. And the last time we had a storm, the whole ceiling was soaked. I think that weakened the plaster and it fell of its own accord.”

Miss Flora remarked that a new ceiling would be a heavy expense for them. “Oh dear, more troubles all the time. But I still don’t want to part with my home.”

Nancy, whose faculties by now were completely restored, said with a hint of a smile, “Well, there’s one worry you might not have any more, Miss Flora.”

“What’s that?”

“Mr. Gomber,” said Nancy, “may not be so interested in buying this property when he sees what happened.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Aunt Rosemary spoke up. “He’s pretty persistent.”

Nancy said she felt all right now and suggested that she and Helen start cleaning up the hall.

Miss Flora would not hear of this. “Rosemary and I are going to help,” she said determinedly.

Cartons were brought from the cellar and one after the other was filled with the debris. After it had all been carried outdoors, mops and dust cloths were brought into use. Within an hour all the gritty plaster dust had been removed.

The weary workers had just finished their job when the telephone rang. Nancy, being closest to the instrument, answered it. Hannah Gruen was calling.

“Nancy! What happened?” she asked. “I’ve been waiting over an hour for you to call me back. “What’s the matter?”

Nancy gave her all the details.

“What’s going to happen to you next?” the housekeeper exclaimed.

The young sleuth laughed. “Something good, I hope.”

She asked Hannah to look for her copy of the River Heights Gazette of the Tuesday before. In a few minutes the housekeeper brought it to the phone and Nancy asked her to turn to page fourteen. “That has the classified ads,” she said. “Now tell me what the ad is right in the center of the page.”

“Do you mean the one about used cars?”

“That must be it,” Nancy replied. “That’s not in my paper.”

Hannah Gruen said it was an ad for Aken’s, a used-car dealer. “He’s at 24 Main Street in Hancock.”

“And now turn the page and tell me what ad is on the back of it,” Nancy requested.

“It’s a story about a school picnic,” Hannah told her. “Does either one of them help you?”

“Yes, Hannah, I believe you’ve given me just the information I wanted. This may prove to be valuable. Thanks a lot.”

After Nancy had finished the call, she started to dial police headquarters, then changed her mind. The ghost might be hiding somewhere in the house to listenor if he had installed microphones at various points, any conversations could be picked up and recorded on a machine a distance away.

“It would be wiser for me to discuss the whole matter in person with the police, I’m sure,” Nancy decided.

Divulging her destination only to Helen, she told the others she was going to drive downtown but would not be gone long.

“You’re sure you feel able?” Aunt Rosemary asked her.

“I’m perfectly fine,” Nancy insisted.

She set off in the convertible, hopeful that through the clue of the used-car dealer, the police might be able to pick up the name of one of the suspects.

“They can track him down and through the man locate my father!”

CHAPTER XIV

An Urgent Message

"EXCELLENT! " Captain Rossland said after Nancy had told her story. He smiled, "The way you're building up clues, if you were on my force, I'd recommend a citation for you!"

The young sleuth smiled and thanked him. *1 must find my father," she said earnestly,*

I'll call Captain McGinnis of the River Heights force at once," the officer told her. "Why don't you sit down here and wait? It shouldn't take long for them to get information from, Aken's used car lot,"

Nancy agreed and took a chair in a corner of the Captain's office. Presently he called to her.

"I have your answer, Miss Drew."

She jumped up and went over to his desk, The officer told her that Captain McGinnis in River Heights had been most co-operative. He had sent two men at once to Aken's used-car lot. They had just returned with a report.

"Day before yesterday an athletic-looking man with a crinkly ear came there and purchased a car. He showed a driver's license stating that he was Samuel Greenman from Huntsville."

Nancy was excited over the information. "Then it will be easy to pick him up, won't it?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not," Captain Rossland replied. "McGinnis learned from the Huntsville police that although Greenman is supposed to live at the address he gave, he is reported to have been out of town for some time."

"Then no one knows where he is?"

"Not any of his neighbors."

The officer also reported that Samuel Greenman was a person of questionable character. He was wanted on a couple of robbery charges, and police in several states had been alerted to be on the lookout for him.

“Well, if the man I saw at my car is Samuel Greenman, then maybe he’s hiding in this area.”

Captain Rossland smiled. “Are you going to suggest next that he is the ghost at Twin Elms?”

“Who knows?” Nancy countered.

“In any case,” Captain Rossland said, “your idea that he may be hiding out around here is a good one.”

Nancy was about to ask the officer another question when his phone rang. A moment later he said, “It’s for you, Miss Drew.”

The girl detective picked up the receiver and said, “Hello.” The caller was Helen Corning and her voice sounded frantic.

“Oh, Nancy, something dreadful has happened here! You must come home at once!”

“What is it?” Nancy cried out, but Helen had already put down the instrument at her end.

Nancy told Captain Rossland of the urgent request and said she must leave at once.

“Let me know if you need the police,” the officer called after her.

“Thank you, I will.”

Nancy drove to Twin Elms as fast as the law allowed. As she pulled up in front of the house, she was startled to see a doctor’s car there. Someone had been taken ill!

Helen met her friend at the front door. “Nancy,” she said in a whisper, “Miss Flora may have had a heart attack!”

“How terrible!” Nancy said, shocked. “Tell me all about it.”

“Dr. Morrison wants Miss Flora to go to the hospital right away, but she refuses. She says she won’t leave here.”

Helen said that the physician was still upstairs attending her great-grandmother.

“When did she become ill?” Nancy asked. “Did something in particular bring on the attack?’

Helen nodded. “Yes. It was very frightening. Miss Flora, Aunt Rosemary, and I were in the kitchen talking about supper. They wanted to have a special dish to surprise you, because they knew you were dreadfully upset.”

“That was sweet of them,” Nancy remarked. “Please go on, Helen.”

“Miss Flora became rather tired and Aunt Rosemary suggested that she go upstairs and lie down. She had just started up the stairway, when, for some unknown reason, she turned to look back. There, in the parlor, stood a man!”

“A caller?” Nancy questioned.

“Oh, no!” Helen replied. “Miss Flora said he was an ugly, horrible-looking person. He was unshaven and his hair was kind of long.”

“Do you think he was the ghost?” Nancy inquired.

“Miss Flora thought so. Well, she didn’t scream. You know, she’s really terribly brave. She just decided to go down and meet him herself. And then, what do you think?”

“I could guess any number of things,” Nancy replied. “What did happen?”

Helen said that when Mrs. Turnbull had reached the parlor, no one was in it! “And there was no secret door open.”

“What did Miss Flora do then?” Nancy asked.

“She fainted.”

At this moment a tall, slender, gray-haired man, carrying a physician’s bag, walked down the stairs to the front hall. Helen introduced Nancy to him, then asked about the patient.

“Well, fortunately, Miss Flora is going to be all right,” said Dr. Morrison. “She is an amazing woman. With complete rest and nothing more to worry her, I believe she will be all right. In fact, she may be able to be up for short periods by this time tomorrow.”

“Oh, I’m so relieved,” said Helen. “I’m terribly fond of my great-grandmother and I don’t want anything to happen to her.”

The physician smiled. “I’ll do all I can, but you people will have to help.”

“How can we do that?” Nancy asked quickly.

The physician said that no one was to talk about the ghost. “Miss Flora says that she saw a man in the parlor and that he must have come in by some secret entrance. Now you know, as well as I do, that such a thing is not plausible.”

“But the man couldn’t have entered this house any other way,” Helen told him quickly. “Every window and door on this first floor is kept locked.”

The doctor raised his eyebrows. “You’ve heard of hallucinations?” he asked.

Nancy and Helen frowned, but remained silent.

They were sure that Miss Flora had not had an hallucination. If she had said there was a man in the parlor, then one had been there!

“Call me if you need me before tomorrow morning,” the doctor said as he moved toward the front door. “Otherwise I’ll drop in some time before twelve.”

After the medic had left, the two girls exchanged glances. Nancy said, “Are you game to search the parlor again?”

“You bet I am,” Helen responded. “Shall we start now or wait until after supper?”

Although Nancy was eager to begin at once, she thought that first she should go upstairs and extend her sympathy to Miss Flora. She also felt that a delay in serving her supper while the search went on might upset the ill woman. Helen offered to go into the kitchen at once and start preparing the meal. Nancy nodded and went up the steps.

Miss Flora had been put to bed in her daughter’s room to avoid any further scares from die ghost, who seemed to operate in the elderly woman’s own room.

“Miss Flora, I’m so sorry you have to stay in bed,” said Nancy, walking up and smiling at the patient.

“Well, I am too,” Mrs. Turnbull replied. “And I think it’s a lot of nonsense. Everybody faints once in a while. If you’d ever seen what I didthat horrible face!”

“Mother!” pleaded Aunt Rosemary, who was seated in a chair on the other side of the bed. “You know what the doctor said.”

“Oh, these doctors!” her mother said pettishly. “Anyway, Nancy, I’m sure I saw the ghost. Now you just look for a man who hasn’t shaved in goodness knows how long and has an ugly face and kind of longish hair.”

It was on the tip of Nancy’s tongue to ask for information on the man’s height and size, but recalling the doctor’s warning, she said nothing about this. Instead, she smiled and taking one of Miss Flora’s hands in her own, said:

“Let’s not talk any more about this until you’re up and well. Then I’ll put you on the Drew and Company detective squad!”

The amusing remark made the elderly woman smile and she promised to try getting some rest.

“But first I want something to eat,” she demanded. “Do you think you girls can manage alone? I’d like Rosemary to stay here with me.”

“Of course we can manage, and we’ll bring you exactly what you should have to eat.”

Nancy went downstairs and set up a tray for Miss Flora. On it was a cup of steaming chicken bouillon, a thin slice of well-toasted bread, and a saucer of plain gelatin.

A few minutes later Helen took another tray upstairs with a more substantial meal on it for Aunt Rosemary. Then the two girls sat down in the dining room to have their own supper. After finishing it, they quickly washed and dried all the dishes, then started for the parlor.

“Where do you think we should look?” Helen whispered.

During the past half hour Nancy had been going over in her mind what spot in the parlor they might have overlookedone which could possibly have an opening behind it. She had decided on a large cabinet built into the wall. It contained a beautiful collection of figurines, souvenirs from many places, and knickknacks of various kinds.

“I’m going to look for a hidden spring that may move the cabinet away from the wall,” Nancy told Helen in a low voice.

For the first time she noticed that each of the figurines and knickknacks were set in small depressions on the shelves. Nancy wondered excitedly if this had been done so that the figurines would not fall over in case the cabinet were moved.

Eagerly she began to look on the back wall of the interior of the cabinet for a spring. She and Helen together searched every inch of the upper part but found no spring to move the great built-in piece of furniture.

On the lower part of the cabinet were two doors which Nancy had already opened many times. But then she had been looking for a large opening.

Now she was hoping to locate a tiny spring or movable panel.

Helen searched the left side, while Nancy took the right. Suddenly her pulse quickened in anticipation. She had felt a spot slightly higher than the rest.

Nancy ran her fingers back and forth across the area which was about half an inch high and three inches long.

“It may conceal something,” she thought, and pushed gently against the wood.

Nancy felt a vibration in the whole cabinet

“Helen! I’ve found something!” she whispered hoarsely. “Better stand back!”

Nancy pressed harder. This time the right side of the cabinet began to move forward. Nancy jumped up from her knees and stood back with Helen. Slowly, very slowly, one end of the cabinet began to move into the parlor, the other into an open space behind it.

Helen grabbed Nancy’s hand in fright. What were they going to find in the secret passageway?

CHAPTER XV

A New Suspect

THE GREAT crystal chandelier illuminated the narrow passageway behind the cabinet. It was not very long. No one was in it and the place was dusty and filled with cobwebs.

“There’s probably an exit at the other end of this,” said Nancy. “Let’s see where it goes.”

“I think I’d better wait here, Nancy,” Helen suggested. “This old cabinet might suddenly start to close itself. If it does, I’ll yell so you can get out in time.”

Nancy laughed. “You’re a real pal, Helen.”

As Nancy walked along the passageway, she looked carefully at the two walls which lined it. There was no visible exit from either of the solid, plastered walls. The far end, too, was solid, but this wall had been built of wood.

Nancy felt it might have some significance. At the moment she could not figure it out and started to return to the parlor. Halfway along the narrow corridor, she saw a folded piece of paper lying on the floor.

“This may prove something,” she told herself eagerly, picking it up.

Just as Nancy stepped back into the parlor, Aunt Rosemary appeared. She stared in astonishment at the opening in the wall and at the cabinet which now stood at right angles to it.

“You found something?” she asked.

“Only this,” Nancy replied, and handed Aunt Rosemary the folded paper.

As the girls looked over her shoulder, Mrs. Hayes opened it. “This is an unfinished letter,” she commented, then started to decipher the old-fashioned handwriting. “Why, this was written way back in 1785not long after the house was built.”

The note read:

My honorable friend Benjamin:

The disloyalty of two of my servants has first come to my attention. I am afraid they plan to harm the cause of the Colonies. I will have them properly punished. My good fortune in learning about this disloyalty came while I was at my listening post. Every word spoken in the servants' sitting room can be overheard by me.

I will watch for further

The letter ended at this point Instantly Helen said, "Listening post?"

"It must be at the end of this passageway," Nancy guessed. "Aunt Rosemary, what room would connect with it?"

"I presume the kitchen," Mrs. Hayes replied. "And it seems to me that I once heard that the present kitchen was a sitting room for the servants long ago. You recall that back in Colonial days food was never cooked in a mansion. It was always prepared in another building and brought in on great trays."

Helen smiled. "With a listening post the poor servants here didn't have a chance for a good chitchat together. Their conversations were never a secret from their master!"

Nancy and Aunt Rosemary smiled too and nodded, then the young sleuth said, "Let's see if this listening post still works."

It was arranged that Helen would go into the kitchen and start talking. Nancy would stand at the end of the corridor to listen. Aunt Rosemary, who was shown how to work the hidden spring on the cabinet, would act as guard if the great piece of furniture suddenly started to move and close the opening.

"All ready?" Helen asked. She moved out of the room.

When she thought Nancy was at her post, she began to talk about her forthcoming wedding and asked Nancy to be in the bridal party.

"I can hear Helen very plainly!" Nancy called excitedly to Aunt Rosemary. "The listening post is as good as ever!"

When the test was over, and the cabinet manually closed by Nancy, she and Helen and Aunt Rosemary held a whispered conversation. They all decided that the ghost knew about the passageway and had overheard plans which those in the house were making. Probably this was where the ghost disappeared after Miss Flora spotted him.

“Funny that we seem to do more planning while we’re in the kitchen than in any other room,” Aunt Rosemary remarked.

Helen said she wondered if this listening post was unique with the owner and architect of Twin Elms mansion.

“No, indeed,” Aunt Rosemary told her. “Many old homes where there were servants had such places. Don’t forget that our country has been involved in several wars, during which traitors and spies found it easy to get information while posing as servants.”

“Very clever,” Helen remarked. “And I suppose a lot of the people who were caught never knew how they had been found out.”

“No doubt,” said Aunt Rosemary.

At that moment they heard Miss Flora’s feeble voice calling from the bedroom and hurried up the steps to be sure that she was all right. They found her smiling, but she complained that she did not like to stay alone so long.

“I won’t leave you again tonight, Mother,” Aunt Rosemary promised. “I’m going to sleep on the couch in this room so as not to disturb you. Now try to get a little sleep.”

The following morning Nancy had a phone call from Hannah Gruen, whose voice sounded very irate. “I’ve just heard from Mr. Barradale, the railroad lawyer, Nancy. He lost your address and phone number, so he called here. I’m furious at what he had to say. He hinted that your father might be staying away on purpose because he wasn’t able to produce Willie Wharton!”

Nancy was angry too. “Why, that’s absolutely unfair and untrue,” she cried.

“Well, I just wouldn’t stand for it if I were you,” Hannah Gruen stated flatly. “And that’s only half of it.”

“You mean he had more to say about Dad?” Nancy questioned quickly.

“No, not that,” the housekeeper answered. “He was calling to say that the railroad can’t hold up the bridge project any longer. If some new evidence isn’t produced by Monday, the railroad will be forced to accede to the demands of Willie Wharton and all those other property owners!”

“Oh, that would be a great blow to Dad!” said

Nancy. “He wouldn’t want this to happen. He’s sure that the signature on that contract of sale is Willie Wharton’s. All he has to do is find him and prove it.”

“Everything is such a mess,” said Mrs. Gruen. “I was talking to the police just before I called you and they have no leads at all to where your father might be.”

“Hannah, this is dreadful” said Nancy. “I don’t know how, but I intend to find Dadand quickly, too!”

After the conversation between herself and the housekeeper was over, Nancy walked up and down the hall, as she tried to formulate a plan. Something must be done!

Suddenly Nancy went to the front door, opened it, and walked outside. She breathed deeply of the lovely morning air and headed for the rose garden. She let the full beauty of the estate sink into her consciousness, before permitting herself to think further about the knotty problem before her.

Long ago Mr. Drew had taught Nancy that the best way to clear one’s brain is to commune with Nature for a time. Nancy went up one walk and down another, listening to the twittering of the birds and now and then the song of the meadow lark. Again she smelled deeply of the roses and the sweet wisteria which hung over a sagging arbor.

Ten minutes later she returned to the house and sat down on the porch steps. Almost at once a mental image of Nathan Comber came to her as dearly as if the man had been standing in front of her. The young sleuth’s mind began to put together the various pieces of the puzzle regarding him and the railroad property.

“Maybe Nathan Comber is keeping Willie Wharton away!” she said to herself. “Willie may even be a prisoner! And if Comber is that kind of a person, maybe he engineered the abduction of my father!”

The very thought frightened Nancy. Leaping up, she decided to ask the police to have Nathan Comber shadowed.

“I’ll go down to headquarters and talk to Captain Rossland,” she decided. “And I’ll ask Helen to go along. The cleaning woman is here, so she can help Aunt Rosemary in case of an emergency.”

Without explaining her real purpose in wanting to go downtown, Nancy merely asked Helen to accompany her there for some necessary marketing. The two girls drove off, and on the way to town Nancy gave Helen full details of her latest theories about Nathan Comber.

Helen was amazed. “And here he was acting so worried about your father’s safety!”

When the girls reached police headquarters, they had to wait a few minutes to see Captain Rossland. Nancy fidgeted under the delay. Every moment seemed doubly precious now. But finally the girls were ushered inside and the officer greeted them warmly.

“Another clue, Miss Drew?” he asked with a smile.

Nancy told her story quickly.

“I think you’re on the right track,” the officer stated. “I’ll be very glad to get in touch with your Captain McGinnis in River Heights and relay your message. And I’ll notify all the men on my force to be on the lookout for this Nathan Comber.”

“Thank you,” said Nancy gratefully. “Every hour that goes by I become more and more worried about my father.”

“A break should come soon,” the officer told her kindly. “The minute I hear anything I’ll let you know.”

Nancy thanked him and the girls went on their way. It took every bit of Nancy’s stamina not to show her inmost feelings. She rolled the cart through the supermarket almost automatically, picking out needed food items. Her mind would say, “We need more canned peas because the ghost took what we had,” and at the meat counter she reflected, “Dad loves thick, juicy steaks.”

Finally the marketing was finished and the packages stowed in the rear of the convertible. On the way home, Helen asked Nancy what plans she had for pursuing the mystery.

“To tell the truth, I’ve been thinking about it continuously, but so far I haven’t come up with any new ideas,” Nancy answered. “I’m sure, though, that something will pop up.”

When the girls were a little distance from the entrance to the Twin Elms estate, they saw a car suddenly pull out of the driveway and make a right turn. The driver leaned out his window and looked back.

He wore a smug grin.

“Why, it’s Nathan Gomber!” Nancy cried out.

“And did you see that smirk on his face?” Helen asked. “Oh, Nancy, maybe that means he’s finally persuaded Miss Flora to sell the property to him!”

“Yes,” Nancy replied grimly. “And also, here I’ve just asked the police to shadow him and I’m the first person to see him!”

With that Nancy put on speed and shot ahead. As she passed the driveway to the estate, Helen asked, “Where are you going?”

“I’m following Nathan Comber until I catch him!”

CHAPTER XVI

Sold!

“On, NANCY, I hope we meet a police officer!” said Helen Corning. “If Comber is a kidnaper, he may try to harm us if we do catch up to him!”

“We’ll have to be cautious,” Nancy admitted. “But I’m afraid we’re not going to meet any policeman. I haven’t seen one on these roads in all the time I’ve been here.”

Both girls watched the car ahead of them intently. It was near enough for Nancy to be able to read the license number. She wondered if the car was registered under Comber’s name or someone else’s. If it belonged to a friend of his, this fact might lead the police to another suspect

“Where do you think Comber’s going?” Helen asked presently. “To meet somebody?”

“Perhaps. And he may be on his way back to River Heights.”

“Not yet,” Helen said, for at that moment Comber had reached a crossroads and turned sharp right. “That road leads away from River Heights.”

“But it does lead past Riverview Manor,” Nancy replied tensely as she neared the crossroads.

Turning right, the girls saw Comber ahead, tearing along at a terrific speed. He passed the vacant mansion. A short distance beyond it he began to turn his car lights off and on.

“What’s he doing that for?” Helen queried. “Is he just testing his lights?”

Nancy was not inclined to think so. “I believe he’s signaling to someone. Look all around, Helen, and see if you can spot anybody.” She herself was driving so fast that she did not dare take her eyes from the road.

Helen gazed right and left, and then turned to gaze through the back window. “I don’t see a soul,” she reported.

Nancy began to feel uneasy. It was possible that Comber might have been signaling to someone to follow the girls. “Helen, keep looking out the rear window and see if a car appears and starts to follow us.”

“Maybe we ought to give up the chase and just tell the police about Comber,” Helen said a bit fearfully.

But Nancy did not want to do this. “I think it will help us a lot to know where he’s heading.”

She continued the pursuit and several miles farther on came to the town of Hancock.

“Isn’t this where that crinkly-eared fellow lives?” Helen inquired.

“Yes.”

“Then it’s my guess Comber is going to see him.”

Nancy reminded her friend that the man was reported to be out of town, presumably because he was wanted by the police on a couple of robbery charges.

Though Hancock was small, there was a great deal of traffic on the main street. In the center of town at an intersection, there was a signal light. Comber shot through the green, but by the time Nancy reached the spot, the light had turned red.

“Oh dear!” she fumed. “Now I’ll probably lose him!”

In a few seconds the light changed to green and Nancy again took up her pursuit. But she felt that at this point it was futile. Comber could have turned down any of a number of side streets, or if he had gone straight through the town he would now be so far ahead of her that it was doubtful she could catch him. Nancy went on, nevertheless, for another three miles. Then, catching no sight of her quarry, she decided to give up the chase.

“I guess it’s hopeless, Helen,” she said. “I’m going back to Hancock and report everything to the police there. I’ll ask them to get in touch with Captain Rossland and Captain McGinnis.”

“Oh, I hope they capture Comber 1” Helen said. “He’s such a horrible man! He ought to be put in jail just for his bad manners!”

Smiling, Nancy turned the car and headed back for Hancock. A

woman passer-by gave her directions to police headquarters and a few moments later Nancy parked in front of it. The girls went inside the building. Nancy told the officer in charge who they were, then gave him full details of the recent chase.

The officer listened attentively, then said, “I’ll telephone your River Heights captain first.”

“And please alert your own men and the State Police,” Nancy requested.

He nodded. “Don’t worry, Miss Drew, I’ll follow through from here.” He picked up his phone.

Helen urged Nancy to leave immediately. “While you were talking, I kept thinking about Comber’s visit to Twin Elms. I have a feeling something may have happened there. You remember what a self-satisfied look Comber had on his face when we saw him come out of the driveway.”

“You’re right,” Nancy agreed. “We’d better hurry back there.”

It was a long drive back to Twin Elms and the closer the girls go to it, the more worried they became. “Miss Flora was already ill,” Helen said tensely, “and Comber’s visit may have made her worse.”

On reaching the house, the front door was opened by Aunt Rosemary, who looked pale.

“I’m so glad you’ve returned,” she said. “My mother is much worse. She has had a bad shock. I’m waiting for Dr. Morrison.”

Mrs. Hayes voice was trembling and she found it hard to go on. Nancy said sympathetically, “We know Nathan Comber was here. We’ve been chasing his car, but lost it. Did he upset Miss Flora?”

“Yes. I was out of the house about twenty minutes talking with the gardener and didn’t happen to see Comber drive up. The cleaning woman, Lillie, let him in. Of course she didn’t know who he was and thought he was all right. When she finally came outside to tell me, I had walked way over to the wisteria arbor at the far end of the grounds.

“In the meantime, Comber went upstairs. He began talking to Mother about selling the mansion. When she refused, he threatened her, saying that if she did not sign, all kinds of dreadful things would

happen to me and to both you girls.

“Poor mother couldn’t hold out any longer. At this moment Lillie, who couldn’t find me, returned and went upstairs. She actually witnessed Mother’s signature on the contract of sale and signed her own name to it. So Comber has won!”

Aunt Rosemary sank into the chair by the telephone and began to cry. Nancy and Helen put their arms around her, but before either could say a word of comfort, they heard a car drive up in front of the mansion. At once Mrs. Hayes dried her eyes and said, “It must be Dr. Morrison.”

Nancy opened the door and admitted the physician. The whole group went upstairs where Miss Flora lay staring at the ceiling like someone in a trance. She was murmuring:

“I shouldn’t have signed! I shouldn’t have sold Twin Elms!”

Dr. Morrison took the patient’s pulse and listened to her heartbeat with a stethoscope. A few moments later he said, “Mrs. Turnbull, won’t you please let me take you to the hospital?”

“Not yet,” said Miss Flora stubbornly. She smiled wanly. “I know I’m ill. But I’m not going to get better any quicker in the hospital than I am right here. I’ll be moving out of Twin Elms soon enough and I want to stay here as long as I can. Oh, why did I ever sign my name to that paper?”

As an expression of defeat came over the physician’s face, Nancy moved to the bedside. “Miss Flora,” she said gently, “maybe the deal will never go through. In the first place, perhaps we can prove that you signed under coercion. If that doesn’t work, you know it takes a long time to have a title search made on property. By then, maybe Comber will change his mind.”

“Oh, I hope you’re right,” the elderly woman replied, squeezing Nancy’s hand affectionately.

The girls left the room, so that Dr. Morrison could examine the patient further and prescribe for her. They decided to say nothing of their morning’s adventure to Miss Flora, but at luncheon they gave Aunt Rosemary a full account.

“I’m almost glad you didn’t catch Comber.” Mrs. Hayes exclaimed. “He might have harmed you both.”

Nancy said she felt sure that the police of one town or the other would soon capture him, and then perhaps many things could be explained. “For one, we can find out why he was turning his lights off and on. I have a hunch he was signaling to someone and that the person was hidden in Riverview Manor!”

“You may be right,” Aunt Rosemary replied.

Helen suddenly leaned across the table. “Do you suppose our ghost thief hides out there?”

“I think it’s very probable,” Nancy answered. “I’d like to do some sleuthing in that old mansion.”

“You’re not going to break in?” Helen asked, horrified.

Her friend smiled. “No, Helen, I’m not going to evade the law. I’ll go to the realtor who is handling the property and ask him to show me the place. Want to come along?”

Helen shivered a little but said she was game. “Let’s do it this afternoon.”

“Oh dear.” Aunt Rosemary gave an anxious sigh. “I don’t know whether or not I should let you. It sounds very dangerous to me.”

“If the realtor is with us, we should be safe,” Helen spoke up. Her aunt then gave her consent, and added that the realtor, Mr. Dodd, had an office on Main Street.

Conversation ceased for a few moments as the threesome finished luncheon. They had just left the table when they heard a loud thump upstairs.

“Oh, goodness!” Aunt Rosemary cried out. “I hope Mother hasn’t fallen!”

She and the girls dashed up the stairs. Miss Flora was in bed, but she was trembling like a leaf in the wind. She pointed a thin, white hand toward the ceiling.

“It was up in the attic! Somebodys there!”

CHAPTER XVII

Through the Trap Door

“LET’S find out who’s in the attic!” Nancy urged as she ran from the room, Helen at her heels.

“Mother, will you be all right if I leave you a few moments?” Aunt Rosemary asked. “I’d like to go with the girls.”

“Of course. Run along.”

Nancy and Helen were already on their way to the third floor. They did not bother to go noiselessly, but raced up the center of the creaking stairs. Reaching the attic, they lighted two of the candles and looked around. They saw no one, and began to look behind trunks and pieces of furniture. Nobody was hiding.

“And there’s no evidence,” said Nancy, “that the alarming thump was caused by a falling box or carton.”

“There’s only one answer,” Helen decided. “The ghost was here. But how did he get in?”

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when the group heard a man’s spine-chilling laugh. It had not come from downstairs.

“Hehe’s back of the wall!” Helen gasped fearfully. Nancy agreed, but Aunt Rosemary said, “That laugh could have come from the roof.”

Helen looked at her aunt questioningly. “You you mean that the ghost swings onto the roof from a tree and climbs in here somehow?”

“I think it very likely,” her aunt replied. “My father once told, my mother that there’s a trap door to the roof. I never saw it and I forgot having heard of it until this minute.”

Holding their candles high, the girls examined every inch of the peaked, beamed ceiling. The rafters were set close together with wood panels between them.

“I see something that might be a trap door!” Nancy called out presently from near one end of the attic. She showed the others where some short panels formed an almost perfect square.

“But how does it open?” Helen asked. “There’s no knob or hook or any kind of gadget to grab hold of.”

“It might have been removed, or rusted off,” Nancy said.

She asked Helen to help her drag a high wooden box across the floor until it was directly under the suspected section and Nancy stepped up onto it. Focusing her light on the four edges of the panels, the young sleuth finally discovered a piece of metal wedged between two of the planks.

“I think I see a way to open this,” Nancy said, “but I’ll need some tools.”

“I’ll get the ones I found before,” Helen offered.

She hurried downstairs and procured them. Nancy tried one tool after another, but none would work; they were either too wide to fit into the crack or they would not budge the piece of metal either up or down.

Nancy looked down at Aunt Rosemary. “Do you happen to have an old-fashioned buttonhook?” she asked. “That might be just the thing for this job.”

“Indeed I havein fact, Mother has several of them. I’ll get one.”

Aunt Rosemary was gone only a few minutes. Upon her return, she handed Nancy a long, silver-handled buttonhook inscribed with Mrs. Turnbull’s initials. “Mother used this to fasten her high button shoes. She has a smaller matching one for glove buttons. In olden days,” she told the girls, “no lady’s gloves were the pull-on type. They all had buttons.”

Nancy inserted the long buttonhook into the ceiling crack and almost at once was able to grasp the piece of metal and pull it down. Now she began tugging on it. When nothing happened, Helen climbed up on the box beside her friend and helped pull

Presently there was a groaning, rasping noise and the square section of the ceiling began to move downward. The girls continued to yank on the metal piece and slowly a folded ladder attached to the wood became visible.

“The trap door’s up there!” Helen cried gleefully, looking at the roof. “Nancy, you shall have the honor of being the first one to look out.”

Nancy smiled. “And, you mean, capture the ghost?”

As the ladder was straightened out, creaking with each pull, and set against the roof, Nancy felt sure, however, that the ghost did not use it. The ladder made entirely too much noise! She also doubted that he was on the roof, but it would do no harm to look. She might pick up a clue of some sort!

“Well, here I go,” Nancy said, and started to ascend the rungs.

When she reached the top, Nancy unfastened the trap door and shoved it upward. She poked her head outdoors and looked around. No one was in sight on the roof, but in the center stood a circular wooden lookout. It occurred to Nancy that possibly the ghost might be hiding in it!

She called down to Aunt Rosemary and Helen to look up at the attic ceiling for evidence of an opening into the tower. They returned to Nancy in half a minute to report that they could find no sign of another trap door.

“There probably was one in olden days,” said Aunt Rosemary, “but it was closed up.”

A sudden daring idea came to the girl detective. “I’m going to crawl over to that lookout and see if anybody’s in it!” she told the two below.

Before either of them could object, she started to crawl along the ridgepole above the wooden shingled sides of the deeply slanting roof. Helen had raced up the ladder, and now watched her friend fearfully.

“Be careful, Nancy!” she warned.

Nancy was doing just that. She must keep a perfect balance or tumble down to almost certain death. Halfway to the tower, the daring girl began to feel that she had been foolhardy, but she was determined to reach her goal.

“Only five more feet to go,” Nancy told herself presently.

With a sigh of relief, she reached the tower and pulled herself tip. It was circular and had openings on each side. She looked in. No “ghost”!

Nancy decided to step inside the opening and examine the floor. She

set one foot down, but immediately the boards, rotted from the weather, gave way beneath her.

“It’s a good thing I didn’t put my whole weight on it,” she thought thankfully.

“Do you see anything?” Helen called.

“Not a thing. This floor hasn’t been in use for a long time.”

“Then the ghost didn’t come in by way of the roof,” Helen stated.

Nancy nodded in agreement. “The only places left to look are the chimneys,” the young sleuth told her friend. “I’ll check them.”

There were four of these and Nancy crawled to each one in turn. She looked inside but found nothing to suggest that the ghost used any of them for entry.

Balancing herself against the last chimney. Nancy surveyed the countryside around her. What a beautiful and picturesque panorama it was, she thought! Not far away was a lazy little river, whose waters sparkled in the sunlight. The surrounding fields were green and sprinkled with patches of white daisies.

Nancy looked down on the grounds of Twin Elms and tried in her mind to reconstruct the original landscaping.

“That brick walk to the next property must have had a lovely boxwood hedge at one time,” she said to herself.

Her gaze now turned to Riverview Manor. The grounds there were overgrown with weeds and several shutters were missing from the house. Suddenly Nancy’s attention was drawn to one of the uncovered windowpanes. Did she see a light moving inside?

It disappeared a moment later and Nancy could not be sure. Perhaps the sun shining on the glass had created an optical illusion.

“Still, somebody just might be in that house,” the young sleuth thought. “The sooner I get over there and see what I can find out, the better! If the ghost is hiding out there, maybe he uses some underground passage from one of the outbuildings on the property.”

She crawled cautiously back to the trap door and together the girls closed it. Aunt Rosemary had already gone downstairs to take care of

her mother.

Nancy told Helen what she thought she had just seen in the neighboring mansion. “I’ll change my clothes right away. Then let’s go see Mr. Dodd, the realtor broker for Riverview Manor.”

A half hour later the two girls walked into the real-estate office. Mr. Dodd himself was there and Nancy asked him about looking at Riverview Manor.

“I’m sorry, miss,” he said, “but the house has just been sold.”

Nancy was stunned. She could see all her plans crumbling into nothingness. Then a thought came to her. Perhaps the new owner would not object if she looked around, anyway.

“Would you mind telling me, Mr. Dodd, who purchased Riverview Manor?”

“Not at all,” the realtor replied. “A man named Nathan Comber.”

CHAPTER XVIII

A Confession

NANCY DREW'S face wore such a disappointed look that Mr. Dodd, the realtor, said kindly, "Don't take it so hard, miss. I don't think you'd be particularly interested in Riverview Manor. It's really not in very good condition. Besides, you'd need a pile of money to fix that place up."

Without commenting on his statement, Nancy asked, "Couldn't you possibly arrange for me to see the inside of the mansion?"

Mr. Dodd shook his head. "I'm afraid Mr. Comber wouldn't like that."

Nancy was reluctant to give up. Why, her father might even be a prisoner in that very house! "Of course I can report my suspicion to the police," the young sleuth thought.

She decided to wait until morning. Then, if there was still no news of Mr. Drew, she would pass along the word to Captain Rossland.

Mr. Dodd's telephone rang. As he answered it, Nancy and Helen started to leave his office. But he immediately waved them back.

"The call is from Chief Rossland, Miss Drew," he said. "He phoned Twin Elms and learned you were here. He wants to see you at once."

"Thank you," said Nancy, and the girls left.

They hurried to police headquarters, wondering why the officer wanted to speak to Nancy.

"Oh, if only it's news of Dad," she exclaimed fervently. "But why didn't he get in touch with me himself?"

"I don't want to be a killjoy," Helen spoke up. "But maybe it's not about your father at all. Perhaps they've caught Nathan Comber."

Nancy parked in front of headquarters and the two girls hurried inside the building. Captain Rossland was expecting them and they were immediately ushered into his office. Nancy introduced Helen Corning.

"I won't keep you in suspense," the officer said, watching Nancy's eager face. "We have arrested Samuel Greenman!"

“The crinkly-eared man?” Helen asked.

“That’s right,” Captain Rossland replied. “Thanks to your tip about the used car, Miss Drew, our men had no trouble at all locating him.”

The officer went on to say, however, that the prisoner refused to confess that he had had anything to do with Mr. Drew’s disappearance.

“Furthermore, Harry the taxi driverwe have him hereinsists that he cannot positively identify Greenman as one of the passengers in his cab. We believe Harry is scared that Greenman’s pals will beat him up or attack members of his family.”

“Harry did tell me,” Nancy put in, “that his passenger had threatened harm to his family unless he forgot all about what he had seen.”

“That proves our theory,” Captain Rossland stated with conviction. “Miss Drew, we think you can help the police.”

“I’ll be glad to. How?”

Captain Rossland smiled. “You may not know it, but you’re a very persuasive young lady. 1 believe that you might be able to get information out of both Harry and Greenman, where we nave failed.”

After a moment’s thought, Nancy replied modestly, “I’ll be happy to try, but on one condition.” She grinned at the officer. “I must talk to these men alone.”

“Request granted.” Captain Rossland smiled. He added that he and Helen would wait outside and he would have Harry brought in.

“Good luck,” said Helen as she and the captain left the room.

A few moments later Harry walked in alone. “Oh hello, miss,” he said to Nancy, barely raising his eyes from the floor.

“Won’t you sit down, Harry,” Nancy asked, indictating a chair alongside hers. “It was nice of the captain to let me talk to you.”

Harry seated himself, but said nothing. He twisted his driver’s tap nervously in his hands and kept his gaze downward.

“Harry,” Nancy began, “I guess your children would feel terrible if you were kidnapped.”

“It would cut ‘em to pieces,” the cabman stated emphatically.

“Then you know how I feel,” Nancy went on. “Not a word from my father for two whole days. If your children knew somebody who’d seen the person who kidnapped you, wouldn’t they feel bad if the man wouldn’t talk?”

Harry at last raised his eyes and looked straight at Nancy. “I get you, miss. When somethin’ comes home to you, it makes all the difference in the world. You win! I can identify that scoundrel Greenman, and I will. Call the captain in.”

Nancy did not wait a second. She opened the door and summoned the officer,

“Harry has something to tell you,” Nancy said to Captain Rossland.

“Yeah,” said Harry, “I’m not goin’ to hold out any longer, I admit Greenman had me scared, but he’s the guy who rode in my cab, then ordered me to keep my mouth shut after that other passenger blacked out.”

Captain Rossland looked astounded. It was evident he could hardly believe that Nancy in only a few minutes had persuaded the man to talk!

“And now,” Nancy asked, “may I talk to your prisoner?”

“I’ll have you taken to his cell,” the captain responded, and rang for a guard.

Nancy was led down a corridor, past a row of cells until they came to one where the man with the crinkled ear sat on a cot.

“Greenman,” said the guard, “step up here. This is Miss Nancy Drew, daughter of the kidnapped man. She wants to talk to you.”

The prisoner shuffled forward, but mumbled, “I ain’t goin’ to answer no questions.”

Nancy waited until the guard had moved off, then she smiled at the prisoner. “We all make mistakes at times,” she said. “We’re often misled by people who urge us to do things we shouldn’t. Maybe you’re afraid you’ll receive the death sentence for helping to kidnap my father. But if you didn’t realize the seriousness of the whole thing, the complaint against you may turn out just to be conspiracy.”

To Nancy's astonishment, Greenman suddenly burst out, "You've got me exactly right, miss. I had almost nothing to do with takin' your father away. The guy I was withhe's the old-timer. He's got a long prison record. I haven't. Honest, miss, this is my first offense.

"I'll tell you the whole story. I met this guy only Monday night. He sure sold me a bill of goods. But all I did was see that your pop didn't run away. The old-timer's the one that drugged him."

"Where is my father now?" Nancy interrupted.

"I don't know. Honest I don't," Greenman insisted. "Part of the plan was for somebody to follow the taxi. After a while Mr. Drew was to be given a whiff of somethin'. It didn't have no smell. That's why our taxi driver didn't catch on. And it didn't knock the rest of us out, 'cause you have to put the stuff right under a fellow's nose to make it work."

"And the person who was following in a car and took my father away, who is he?"

"I don't know," the prisoner answered, and Nancy felt that he was telling the truth.

"Did you get any money for doing this?" Nancy asked him.

"A little. Not as much as it was worth, especially if I have to go to prison. The guy who paid us for our work was the one in the car who took your father away."

"Will you describe him?" Nancy requested.

"Sure. Hope the police catch him soon. He's in his early fiftiesshort and heavy-set, pale, and has kind of watery blue eyes."

Nancy asked the prisoner if he would dictate the same confession for the police and the man nodded. "And I'm awful sorry I caused all this worry, miss. I hope you find your father soon and I wish I could help you more. I guess I am a coward. I'm too scared to tell the name of the guy who talked me into this whole thing. He's really a bad actorno tellin what'd happen to me if I gave his name."

The young sleuth felt that she had obtained all the information she possibly could from the man. She went back to Captain Rossland, who for the second time was amazed by the girl's success. He called a stenographer. Then he said good-by to Nancy and Helen and went off toward Greenman's cell.

On the way back to Twin Elms, Helen congratulated her friend. “Now that one of the kidnapers has been caught, I’m sure that your father will be found soon, Nancy. Who do you suppose the man was who took your father from Greenman and his friend?”

Nancy looked puzzled, then answered, “We know from his description that he wasn’t Gomber. But, Helen, a hunch of mine is growing stronger all the time that he’s back of this whole thing. And putting two and two together, I believe it was Willie Wharton who drove that car.

“And I also believe Wharton’s the one who’s been playing ghost, using masks at timeslike the gorilla and the unshaven, long-haired man.

“Somehow he gets into the mansion and listens to conversations. He heard that I was going to be asked to solve the mystery at Twin Elms and told Comber. That’s why Gomber came to our home and tried to keep me from coming here by saying I should stick close to Dad.”

“That’s right,” said Helen. “And when he found that didn’t work, he had Willie and Greenman and that other man kidnap your dad. He figured it would surely get you away from Twin Elms. He wanted to scare Miss Flora into selling the property, and he thought if you were around you might dissuade her.”

“But in that I didn’t succeed,” said Nancy a bit forlornly. “Besides, they knew Dad could stop those greedy land owners from forcing the railroad to pay them more for their property. That’s why I’m sure Gomber and Wharton won’t release him until after they get what they want.”

Helen laid a hand on Nancy’s shoulder. “I’m so terribly sorry about this. What can we do next?”

“Somehow I have a feeling, Helen,” her friend replied, “that you and I are going to find Willie Wharton before very long. And if we do, and I find out he really signed that contract of sale, I want certain people to be around.”

“Who?” Helen asked, puzzled.

“Mr. Barradale, the lawyer, and Mr. Watson the notary public.”

The young sleuth put her thought into action. Knowing that Monday was the deadline set by the railroad, she determined to do her utmost before that time to solve the complicated mystery. Back at Twin Elms,

Nancy went to the telephone and put in a call to Mr. Barradale's office. She did not dare mention Comber's or Willie Wharton's name for fear one or the other of them might be listening. She merely asked the young lawyer if he could possibly come to Cliffwood and bring with him whatever he felt was necessary for him to win his case.

"I think I understand what you really mean to say," he replied. "I take it you can't talk freely. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll ask the questions. You want me to come to the address that you gave us the other day?"

"Yes. About noon."

"And you'd like me to bring along the contract of sale with Willie Wharton's signature?"

"Yes. That will be fine." Nancy thanked him and hung up.

Turning from the telephone, she went to find Helen and said, "There's still lots of daylight. Even though we can't get inside Riverview Manor, we can hunt through the outbuildings over there for the entrance to an underground passage to this house."

"All right," her friend agreed. "But this time you do the searching. I'll be the lookout."

Nancy chose the old smokehouse of Riverview Manor first, since this was closest to the Twin Elms property line. It yielded no clue and she moved on to the carriage house. But neither in this building, nor any of the others, did the girl detective find any indication of entrances to an underground passageway. Finally she gave up and rejoined Helen.

"If there is an opening, it must be from inside Riverview Manor," Nancy stated. "Oh, Helen, it's exasperating not to be able to get in there!"

"I wouldn't go in there now in any case," Helen remarked. "It's way past suppertime and I'm starved. Besides, pretty soon it'll be dark."

The girls returned to Twin Elms and ate supper. A short time later someone banged the front-door knocker. Both girls went to the door. They were amazed to find that the caller was Mr. Dodd, the realtor. He held out a large brass key toward Nancy.

“What’s this for?” she asked, mystified.

Mr. Dodd smiled.

“It’s the front-door key to Riverview Manor. I’ve decided that you can look around the mansion tomorrow morning all you please.”

CHAPTER XIX

The Hidden Staircase

SEEING the look of delight on Nancy's face, Mr. Dodd laughed. "Do you think that house is haunted as well as this one?" he asked. "I hear you like to solve mysteries."

"Yes, I do." Not wishing to reveal her real purpose to the realtor, the young sleuth also laughed. "Do you think I might find a ghost over there?" she countered.

"Well, I never saw one, but you never can tell," the man responded with a chuckle. He said he would leave the key with Nancy until Saturday evening and then pick it up. "If Mr. Comber should show up in the meantime, I have a key to the kitchen door that he can use."

Nancy thanked Mr. Dodd and with a grin said she would let him know if she found a ghost at Riverview Manor.

She could hardly wait for the next morning to arrive. Miss Flora was not told of the girls' plan to visit the neighboring house.

Immediately after breakfast, they set off for Riverview Manor. Aunt Rosemary went with them to the back door and wished the two good luck. "Promise me you won't take any chances," she begged.

"Promise," they said in unison.

With flashlights in their skirt pockets, Nancy and Helen hurried through the garden and into the grounds of Riverview Manor estate.

As they approached the front porch, Helen showed signs of nervousness. "Nancy, what will we do if we meet the ghost?" she asked.

"Just tell him we've found him out," her friend answered determinedly.

Helen said no more and watched as Nancy inserted the enormous brass key in the lock. It turned easily and the girls let themselves into the hall. Architecturally it was the same as Twin Elms mansion, but how different it looked now! The blinds were closed, lending an eerie atmosphere to the dusky interior. Dust lay everywhere, and cobwebs

festooned the corners of the ceiling and spindles of the staircase.

“It certainly doesn’t look as if anybody lives here,” Helen remarked. “Where do we start hunting?”

“I want to take a look in the kitchen,” said Nancy.

When they walked into it, Helen gasped. “I guess I was wrong. Someone has been eating here.” Eggshells, several empty milk bottles, some chicken bones and pieces of waxed paper cluttered the sink.

Nancy, realizing that Helen was very uneasy, whispered to her with a giggle, “If the ghost lives here, he has a good appetite 1”

The young sleuth took out her flashlight and beamed it around the floors and walls of the kitchen. There was no sign of a secret opening. As she went from room to room on the first floor, Helen followed and together they searched every inch of the place for a clue to a concealed door. At last they came to the conclusion there was none.

“You know, it could be in the cellar,” Nancy suggested.

“Well, you’re not going down there,” Helen said firmly. “That is, not without a policeman. It’s too dangerous. As for myself, I want to live to get married and not be hit over the head in the dark by that ghost, so Jim won’t have a bride!”

Nancy laughed. “You win. But I’ll tell you why. At the moment I am more interested in finding my father than in hunting for a secret passageway. He may be a prisoner in one of the rooms upstairs. I’m going to find out.”

The door to the back stairway was unlocked and the one at the top stood open. Nancy asked

Helen to stand at the foot of the main staircase, while she herself went up the back steps. “If that ghost is up there and tries to escape, he won’t be able to slip out that way,” she explained.

Helen took her post in the front hall and Nancy crept up the back steps. No one tried to come down either stairs. Helen now went to the second floor and together she and Nancy began a search of the rooms. They found nothing suspicious. Mr. Drew was not there. There was no sign of a ghost. None of the walls revealed a possible secret opening. But the bedroom which corresponded to Miss Flora’s had a clothes closet built in at the end next to the fireplace.

“In Colonial times closets were a rarity,” Nancy remarked to Helen. “I wonder if this closet was added at that time and has any special significance.”

Quickly she opened one of the large double doors and looked inside. The rear wall was formed of two very wide wooden planks. In the center was a round knob, sunk in the wood.

“This is strange,” Nancy remarked excitedly.

She pulled on the knob but the wall did not move. Next, she pushed the knob down hard, leaning her full weight against the panel.

Suddenly the wall pushed inward. Nancy lost her balance and disappeared into a gaping hole below!

Helen screamed. “Nancy!”

Trembling with fright, Helen stepped into the closet and beamed her flashlight below. She could see a long flight of stone steps.

“Nancy! Nancy!” Helen called down.

A muffled answer came from below. Helen’s heart gave a leap of relief. “Nancy’s alive!” she told herself, then called, “Where are you?”

“I’ve found the secret passageway,” came faintly to Helen’s ears. “Come on down.”

Helen did not hesitate. She wanted to be certain that Nancy was all right. Just as she started down the steps, the door began to close. Helen, in a panic that the girls might be trapped in some subterranean passageway, made a wild grab for the door. Holding it ajar, she removed the sweater she was wearing and wedged it into the opening.

Finding a rail on one side of the stone steps, Helen grasped it and hurried below. Nancy arose from the dank earthen floor to meet her.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Helen asked solicitously.

“I admit I got a good bang,” Nancy replied, “but I feel fine now. Let’s see where this passageway goes.”

The flashlight had been thrown from her hand, but with the aid of Helen’s light, she soon found it. Fortunately, it had not been damaged and she turned it on.

The passageway was very narrow and barely high enough for the girls to walk without bending over. The sides were built of crumbling brick and stone.

“This may tumble on us at any moment,” Helen said worriedly.

“Oh, I don’t believe so,” Nancy answered. “It must have been here for a long time.”

The subterranean corridor was unpleasantly damp and had an earthy smell. Moisture clung to the walls. They felt clammy and repulsive to the touch.

Presently the passageway began to twist and turn, as if its builders had found obstructions too difficult to dig through.

“Where do you think this leads?” Helen whispered.

“I don’t know. I only hope we’re not going in circles.”

Presently the girls reached another set of stone steps not unlike the ones down which Nancy had tumbled. But these had solid stone sides. By their lights, the girls could see a door at the top with a heavy wooden bar across it.

“Shall we go up?” Helen asked.

Nancy was undecided what to do. The tunnel did not end here but yawned ahead in blackness. Should they follow it before trying to find out what was at the top of the stairs?

She voiced her thoughts aloud, but Helen urged that they climb the stairs. “I’ll be frank with you. I’d like to get out of here.”

Nancy acceded to her friend’s wish and led the way up the steps.

Suddenly both girls froze in their tracks.

A man’s voice from the far end of the tunnel commanded, “Stop! You can’t go up there!”

CHAPTER XX

Nancy's Victory

THEIR initial fright over, both girls turned and beamed their flashlights toward the foot of the stone stairway. Below them stood a short, unshaven, pudgy man with watery blue eyes.

"You're the ghost!" Helen stammered.

"And you're Mr. Willie Wharton," Nancy added.

Astounded, the man blinked in the glaring lights, then said, "Ye-yes, I am. But how did you know?"

"You live in the old Riverview Manor," Helen went on, "and you've been stealing food and silver and jewelry from Twin Elms!"

"No, no. I'm not a thief!" Willie Wharton cried out. "I took some food and I've been trying to scare the old ladies, so they would sell their property. Sometimes I wore false faces, but I never took any jewelry or silver. Honest I didn't. It must have been Mr. Gomber."

Nancy and Helen were amazedWillie Wharton, with little urging from them, was confessing more than they had dared to hope.

"Did you know that Nathan Gomber is a thief?" Nancy asked the man.

Wharton shook his head. "I know he's sharp that's why he's going to get me more money for my property from the railroad."

"Mr. Wharton, did you sign the original contract of sale?" Nancy queried.

"Yes, I did, but Mr. Gomber said that if I disappeared, for a while, he'd fix everything up so I'd get more money. He said he had a couple of other jobs which I could help him with. One of them was coming here to play ghostit was a good place to disappear to. But I wish I had never seen Nathan Gomber or Riverview Manor or Twin Elms or had anything to do with ghosts."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," said Nancy. Then suddenly she asked, "Where's my father?"

Willie Wharton shifted his weight and looked about wildly. "I don't

know, really I don't."

"But you kidnapped him in your car," the young sleuth prodded him. "We got a description of you from the taximan."

Several seconds went by before Willie Wharton answered. "I didn't know it was kidnapping. Mr. Gomber said your father was ill and that he was going to take him to a special doctor. He said Mr. Drew was coming on a train from Chicago and was going to meet Mr. Comber on the road halfway between here and the station. But Comber said he couldn't meet himhad other business to attend to. So I was to follow your father's taxi and bring him to Riverview Manor."

"Yes, yes, go on," Nancy urged, as Willie Wharton stopped speaking and covered his face with his hands.

"I didn't expect your father to be unconscious when I picked him up," Wharton went on. "Well, those men in the taxi put Mr. Drew in the back, of my car and I brought him here. Mr. Comber drove up from the other direction and said he would take over. He told me to come right here to Twin Elms and do some ghosting."

"And you have no idea where Mr. Comber took my father?" Nancy asked, with a sinking feeling.

"Nope."

In a few words she pointed out Nathan Comber's real character to Willie Wharton, hoping that if the man before her did know anything about Mr. Drew's whereabouts which he was not telling, he would confess. But from Wharton's emphatic answers and sincere offers to be of all the help he could in finding the missing lawyer. Nancy concluded that Wharton was not withholding any information.

"How did you find out about this passageway and the secret staircases?" Nancy questioned him.

"Comber found an old notebook under a heap of rubbish in the attic of Riverview Manor," Wharton answered. "He said it told everything about the secret entrances to the two houses. The passageways, with openings on each floor, were built when the houses were. They were used by the original Turnbulls in bad weather to get from one building to the other. This stairway was for the servants. The other two stairways were for the family. One of these led to Mr. Turnbull's bedroom in this house. The notebook also said that he often secretly entertained government agents and sometimes he had to hurry them

out of the parlor and hide them in the passageway when callers came."

"Where does this stairway lead?" Helen spoke up.

"To the attic of Twin Elms."' Willie Wharton gave a little chuckle, "I know, Miss Drew, that you almost found the entrance. But the guys that built the place were pretty clever. Every opening has heavy double doors. When you poked that screw driver through the crack, you thought you were hitting another wall but it was really a door."

"Did you play the violin and turn on the radio and make that thumping noise in the attic and were you the one who laughed when we were up there?"

"Yes, and I moved the sofa to scare you and I even knew about the listening post. That's how I found out all your plans and could report them to Mr. Comber."

Suddenly it occurred to Nancy that Nathan Comber might appear on the scene at any moment. She must get Willie Wharton away and have him swear to his signature before he changed his mind!

"Mr. Wharton, -would you please go ahead of us up this stairway and open the doors?" she asked. "And go into Twin Elms with us and talk to Mrs. Turnbull and Mrs. Hayes? I want you to tell them that you've been playing ghost but aren't going to any longer. Miss Flora has been so frightened that she's ill and in bed."

"I'm sorry about that," Willie Wharton replied. "Sure I'll go with you. I never want to see Nathan Comber again!"

He went ahead of the girls and took down the heavy wooden bar from across the door. He swung it wide, pulled a metal ring in the back of the adjoining door, then quickly stepped downward. The narrow panel opening which Nancy had suspected of leading to the secret stairway now was pulled inward. There was barely room alongside it to go up the top steps and into the attic. To keep Comber from becoming suspicious if he should arrive, Nancy asked Willie Wharton to close the secret door again.

"Helen," said Nancy, "will you please run downstairs ahead of Mr. Wharton and me and tell Miss Flora and Aunt Rosemary the good news."

She gave Helen a three-minute start, then she and Willie Wharton

followed. The amazed women were delighted to have the mystery solved. But there was no time for celebration.

“Mr. Barradale is downstairs to see you, Nancy,” Aunt Rosemary announced.

Nancy turned to Willie Wharton. “Will you come down with me, please?”

She introduced both herself and the missing property owner to Mr. Barradale, then went on, “Mr. Wharton says the signature on the contract of sale is his own.”

“And you’ll swear to that?” the lawyer asked, turning to Willie.

“I sure will. I don’t want anything more to do with this underhanded business,” Willie Wharton declared.

“I know where I can find a notary public right away,” Nancy spoke up, “Do you want me to phone him, Mr. Barradale?” she asked.

“Please do. At once.”

Nancy dashed to the telephone and dialed the number of Albert Watson on Tuttle Road. When he answered, she told him the urgency of the situation and he promised to come over at once. Mr. Watson arrived within five minutes, with his notary equipment. Mr. Barradale showed him the contract of sale containing Willie Wharton’s name and signature. Attached to it was the certificate of acknowledgment.

Mr. Watson asked Willie Wharton to raise his right hand and swear that he was the person named in the contract of sale. After this was done, the notary public filled in the proper places on the certificate, signed it, stamped the paper, and affixed his seal.

“Well, this is really a wonderful job, Miss Drew,” Mr. Barradale praised her.

Nancy smiled, but her happiness at having accomplished a task for her father was dampened by the fact that she still did not know where he was. Mr. Barradale and Willie Wharton also were extremely concerned.

“I’m going to call Captain Rossland and ask him to send some policemen out here at once,” Nancy stated. “What better place for Mr. Comber to hide my father than somewhere along that passageway?

How far does it go, Mr. Wharton?"

"Mr. Comber says it goes all the way to the river, but the end of it is completely stoned up now. I never went any farther than the stairways."

The young lawyer thought Nancy's idea a good one, because if Nathan Comber should return to Riverview Manor and find that Willie was gone, he would try to escape.

The police promised to come at once. Nancy had just finished talking with Captain Rossland when Helen Corning called from the second floor,

"Nancy, can you come up here? Miss Flora insists upon seeing the hidden staircase."

The young sleuth decided that she would just about have time to do this before the arrival of the police. Excusing herself to Mr. Barradale, she ran up the stairs. Aunt Rosemary had put on A rose-colored dressing gown while attending her mother. To Nancy's amazement, Mrs. Turnbull was fully dressed and wore a white blouse with a high collar and a black skirt.

Nancy and Helen led the way to the attic. There, the girl detective, crouching on her knees, opened the secret door.

"And all these years I never knew it was here!" Miss Flora exclaimed.

"And I doubt that my father did or he would have mentioned it," Aunt Rosemary added.

Nancy closed the secret door and they all went downstairs. She could hear the front-door bell ringing and assumed that it was the police. She and Helen hurried below. Captain Rossland and another officer stood there. They said other men had surrounded Riverview Manor, hoping to catch Nathan Comber if he did arrive there.

With Willie Wharton leading the way, the girls, Mr. Barradale, and the police trooped to the attic and went down the hidden staircase to the dank passageway below.

"! have a hunch from reading about old passageways that there may be one or more rooms off this tunnel," Nancy told Captain Rossland.

There were so many powerful flashlights in play now that the place

was almost as bright as daylight. As the group moved along, they suddenly came to a short stairway. Willie Wharton explained that this led to an opening back of the sofa in the parlor. There was still another stone stairway which went up to Miss Flora's bedroom with an opening alongside the fireplace.

The searchers went on. Nancy, who was ahead of the others, discovered a padlocked iron door in the wall. Was it a dungeon? She had heard of such places being used for prisoners in Colonial times.

By this time Captain Rossland had caught up to her. "Do you think your father may be in there?" he asked.

"I'm terribly afraid so," said Nancy, shivering at the thought of what she might find.

The officer found that the lock was very rusty. Pulling from his pocket a penknife with various tool attachments, he soon had the door unlocked and flung it wide. He beamed his light into the blackness beyond. It was indeed a room without windows.

Suddenly Nancy cried out, "Dad!" and sprang ahead.

Lying on blankets on the floor, and covered with others, was Mr. Drew. He was murmuring faintly.

"He's alive!" Nancy exclaimed, kneeling down to pat his face and kiss him.

"He's been drugged," Captain Rossland observed. "I'd say Nathan Comber has been giving your father just enough food to keep him alive and mixing sleeping powders in with it."

From his trousers pocket the officer brought out a small vial of restorative and held it to Mr. Drew's nose. In a few moments the lawyer shook his head, and a few seconds later, opened his eyes.

"Keep talking to your dad," the captain ordered Nancy.

"Dad! Wake up! You're all right! We've rescued you!"

Within a very short time Mr. Drew realized that his daughter was kneeling beside him. Reaching out his arms from beneath the blankets, he tried to hug her.

"We'll take him upstairs," said Captain Rossland. "Willie, open that

secret entrance to the parlor."

"Glad to be of help." Wharton hurried ahead and up the short flight of steps.

In the meantime, the other three men lifted Mr. Drew and carried him along the passageway. By the tune they reached the stairway, Willie

Wharton had Opened the secret door behind the sofa in the parlor. Mr. Drew was placed on the couch. He blinked, looked around, and then said in astonishment:

"Willie Wharton! How did you get here? Nancy, tell me the whole story."

The lawyer's robust health and sturdy constitution had stood him in good stead. He recovered with amazing rapidity from his ordeal and listened in rapt attention as one after another of those in the room related the events of the past few days.

As the story ended, there was a knock on the front door and another police officer was admitted. He had come to report to Captain Rossland that not only had Nathan Comber been captured outside of Riverview Manor, and all the loot recovered, but also that the final member of the group who had abducted Mr. Drew had been taken into custody. Comber had admitted everything, even to having attempted to injure Nancy and her father with the truck at the River Heights' bridge project. He had tried to frighten Miss Flora into selling Twin Elms because he had planned to start a housing project on the two Turnbull properties.

"It's a real victory for you!" Nancy's father praised his daughter proudly.

The young sleuth smiled. Although she was glad it was all over, she could not help but look forward to another mystery to solve. One soon came her way when, quite accidentally, she found herself involved in The Bungalow Mystery.

Miss Flora and Aunt Rosemary had come downstairs to meet Mr. Drew. While they were talking to him, the police officer left, taking Willie Wharton with him as a prisoner. Mr. Barradale also said good-by. Nancy and Helen slipped out of the room and went to the kitchen.

"We'll prepare a super-duper lunch to celebrate this occasion!" said Helen happily.

“And we can make all the plans we want,” Nancy replied with a grin. “There won’t be anyone at the listening post!”

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NANCY DREW MYSTERY STORIES®

The Bungalow Mystery

BY CAROLYN KEENE

GROSSET & DUNLAP
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The man chained to the bench was Jacob Aborn!

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CHAPTER I

A Blinding Storm

"LOOK at those black storm clouds!" Nancy Drew pointed out to her friend, Helen Corning, who was seated beside her in the bow of the small red motorboat.

Nancy, blue-eyed, and with reddish-gold glints in her blond hair, was at the wheel. She gazed anxiously across a long expanse of water to the distant shores of Twin Lakes. The Pinecrest Motel, where the eighteen-year-old girl and her older friend were staying, was almost two miles away on the smaller of the two lakes.

Helen Corning, dark-haired and petite, looked at Nancy with concern. "I think we're in for a cloudburst," she said, "and Twin Lakes becomes as rough as the ocean in a storm."

A few minutes later angry waves began to beat against the sides of the boat.

"Are there life preservers aboard, Helen?" Nancy asked.

"No," Helen answered fearfully.

Nancy set her chin grimly. Although it was only four o'clock in the afternoon, the sky was becoming increasingly dark. The pleasant summer breeze, which had been blowing earlier, was turning into a stiff wind.

"It's getting harder to keep on course," Nancy remarked, gripping the wheel more tightly.

As she increased the boat's speed to the maximum, the craft fairly leaped through the water, dashing spray into the girls' faces.

"I wonder if there are any raincoats in the lockers," said Helen.

"Please look," Nancy requested. "We'll be drenched by the time we reach the motel dock."

Luckily Helen found two plastic coats. She slipped into one, then helped Nancy into the other.

A streak of forked lightning cut across the sky, momentarily disclosing a thick mass of ugly clouds. The lightning was followed by an ominous crack of thunder, which caused the girls to jump.

"This is terrible!" Helen wailed.

A moment later the wind began to howl. It struck the boat with a force which made Helen grasp the railing next to her for support. Another dazzling flash of lightning illuminated the sky, and simultaneously a deluge of rain began to descend.

Nancy peered ahead into the dimness. The shore line had vanished and the blinding rain made it impossible for her to see more than a few feet beyond the bow of the boat.

"At least we have half a tank of fuel," Nancy announced, trying to sound optimistic. "We'll reach shore soon, I'm sure."

"I wouldn't bet on that," Helen said nervously.

A worried expression furrowed the young pilot's brow. The boat was making little progress against the wind. If anything happened to the motor they would be at the mercy of the waves.

A few minutes later the rain came down even harder. The wind continued to blow a raging gale and the waves. seemed higher.

The girls leaned forward, trying to get their bearings. As a jagged ribbon of lightning illuminated the path ahead, Helen screamed, "About!"

Nancy froze with horror. A tremendous log was floating directly into the Path of the motorboat!

Her heart pounding, the young skipper gave the wheel a vicious turn, but not quickly enough. With a splintering crash, the bow of the boat struck the log!

The impact sent Helen sprawling to the deck. Nancy clung to the steering wheel, but was thrown forward violently.

“Helen, are you hurt?” she asked.

“I—I’m all right. Are you?” she stammered, as Nancy helped Helen to her feet. Both girls were breathing heavily.

By now the small boat was listing sharply to starboard. Nancy saw instantly that the log had torn a jagged hole in the side of the craft. Water was pouring in rapidly.

“Quick, Helen!” Nancy ordered tersely. “You bail and I’ll try to stop the leak!”

She sprang forward, tore off her raincoat, and stuffed it into the hole. Helen, meanwhile, found a rusty can and began to bail. Despite their efforts, water continued to pour through the opening.

"Let's shout for help!" Nancy cried above the wind, but she doubted that there was any other craft on the lake.

The girls cupped their hands to their lips and shouted frantically. Their only answer was the howl of the gale and the steady beat of rain.

"Louder!" Helen urged, and they screamed until they were hoarse.

"It's no use," Nancy said at last. "We'll have to think of something else."

Just then Nancy saw a giant wave bearing down on them. She met it head on, hoping to ride the crest, but a deluge of water almost inundated the girls. They were flung overboard and the motorboat sank to the bottom of the lake!

An excellent swimmer, Nancy managed to get her head above water almost immediately. Her first thought was for Helen. What had become of her?

Treading water, Nancy glanced about. Helen was not in sight.

"I must find her!" Nancy thought desperately. "She may have been injured!"

Then, several yards away, Nancy saw a white hand flash above the water. With powerful

crawl strokes she plowed through the waves to the spot. The hand had vanished!

Nancy made a neat surface dive. Opening her eyes, she tried to see through the clouded water but to no avail. At last, she surfaced and drew in a deep breath.

Clearing her eyes, Nancy was relieved to spot her friend several feet ahead. Helen was floating on her back. Strong strokes brought Nancy directly behind her friend.

"My arms feel numb," Helen said weakly. "Guess I hit them on the boat."

"Don't worry," said Nancy. "Just lie still and I'll tow you to shore."

Nancy, however, had grave misgivings regarding her ability to accomplish this in the turbulent water. She needed every ounce of strength to swim the distance alone. *Could* she manage to save Helen? The storm had made the water very cold. Nancy prayed that she would not get a cramp and both girls go down.

"Hold your breath when you see a wave coming," she instructed Helen, as they started off.

At frequent intervals Nancy shouted for help, although she felt it was wasted energy. On and on they went.

Helen noticed finally that Nancy's breathing showed the great strain on her. "Save yourself," she begged. "Go on to shore without me."

"Never!" said Nancy, as a huge wave bore down upon the two girls, smothering them in its impact.

Feebly, Nancy struggled back to the surface with her burden. "One more like that and I'll be through," she said to herself.

Just then Nancy thought she detected a voice above the roar of the wind. Was it her imagination or had she really heard someone call?

"Help!" she screamed.

This time there could be no mistake, for she distinguished the words:

"Hold on! I'm coming!"

Through the blinding rain Nancy caught a glimpse of a dark object. A rowboat! If only she could hold out until it reached her!

"Over here!" Nancy cried loudly, waving.

As the boat approached, she fully expected to see it swamped. The boat swept safely toward the two girls, barely avoiding a crash, however. To Nancy's surprise, there was only one occupant in the boat—a slender, auburn-haired girl of about sixteen.

Twice she tried to bring the boat alongside the swimmers, but failed. The third time, as the craft swept past, Nancy lunged forward and caught the side of it. She dragged Helen along, supporting her with one hand until she, too, secured a hold.

"Can you climb aboard?" their rescuer asked. "I'll balance the boat while you get in."

Nancy explained about the submerged motorboat and Helen's useless arms.

With the strange girl and Nancy working together, they managed to get Helen into the craft. Then Nancy pulled herself over the side.

"Safe!" Helen said in relief. "I don't know how to thank you," she told their rescuer.

"Are you both all right?" asked the strange girl. "We're not far from the beach—otherwise, I couldn't have heard your cries for help in this wind."

"You were very brave to come for us," said Nancy. "I'm Nancy Drew and this is Helen Corning."

The girl at the oars stared at Nancy with keen interest. "I'm Laura Pendleton," she said. "I read in a newspaper about one of the mysteries you solved. I may need your help some day soon, Nancy."

Without another word Laura bent over her oars again.

"I'll help you row," Nancy offered, snatching up an extra oar from the bottom of the rowboat, and wondering what Laura Pendleton's mystery was.

Using the oar like a paddle, Nancy attempted to keep the boat on course. As she and Laura made some progress against the wind and waves, Helen took new hope.

"I think we're going to make it!" she said in relief. "Oh!"

A vivid flash of lightning illuminated the water. Directly ahead, through the rain, she and Nancy caught a glimpse of the rocky shore line.

"The rocks. Laura! Be careful or we'll be dashed against them!" Helen cried out, as the rowboat was tossed and slapped by the crashing waves.

Another zigzag streak of lightning disclosed the shore line more distinctly. A short distance out from the land and directly in front of their boat stood the ugly protruding nose of a jagged boulder!

CHAPTER II

Uninvited Guests

FOR an instant Nancy panicked. Would the girls be able to steer clear of the menacing rocks? A collision seemed unavoidable!

"We'll be killed!" gasped Helen.

"Row to the left, Laura!" Nancy commanded. "It's our only chance."

With a burst of energy the rowers turned the boat and deftly avoided the jagged boulder. An oncoming wave pushed them farther out of danger.

"There's a cove ahead!" Laura shouted above the wind. "We'll try to make it."

In another five minutes they reached the cove. Here the water was comparatively quiet.

"Thank goodness!" Helen murmured. "Oh, you girls are wonderful!"

As Nancy's oar struck a sand bar, she dropped it and quickly stepped out into water up to her knees. Laura followed and the two girls pulled the boat up onto the beach. Then they helped Helen Corning step onto firm sand.

"How do your arms feel now?" Nancy asked her.

"Better," Helen replied. "But I'm freezing." Her teeth were chattering.

Nancy herself was cold. She squinted through the darkness and rain, trying to see where they were. It seemed to be a desolate spot.

"Where are we?" she asked Laura. "Is there some place nearby where we can sit out the storm and get warm?"

"The only place I know," Laura replied, "is a bungalow I passed a while ago as I was walking along the beach. It's to our right, secluded among the trees."

"Sounds fine," Nancy said. "Let's hurry!"

The three bedraggled girls stumbled along the beach. Water oozed from Laura's sandals. Nancy and Helen had kicked theirs off in the lake and now slipped and slid in their soggy socks.

Presently the girls reached a small, concealed building, a one-and-a-half-storied weather-beaten bungalow which stood a short distance from the water's edge. The upper level nestled into the steep, wooded hillside. Since there was no light inside, Nancy assumed no one was there. She knocked. No answer. Nancy tried to open the door. It was locked.

"Looks as if we're out of luck," said Helen.

But Nancy was not easily discouraged, and she knew it was imperative for the girls to get warm. Her father, a well-known lawyer, had trained her to be self-reliant. He frequently handled mystery cases, and Nancy had often helped him in unearthing valuable clues.

In addition, Nancy had solved some mystery cases on her own—one involving an old clock and another a haunted house. There, Nancy had aided its owners to discover a hidden staircase which led to the capture of the mansion's "ghost."

"I'm sure that the owner of this bungalow will forgive us for going in," Nancy said.

There was a small window to the right of the door. She tried it and found to her relief that it was unlocked.

"That's a lucky break," said Helen, as Nancy opened the window.

Fortunately, it was low enough to the ground for the girls to hoist themselves through easily.

"Whew!" Laura exclaimed, as the wind almost blew them inside. She helped Nancy close the window.

It was pitch dark inside the building. Nancy groped around for a light switch, finally found one, and flicked it on. A small bulb in the ceiling disclosed nothing except two canoes and a wooden bench which stood against one wall.

"Maybe it's only a boathouse," said Helen, flopping wearily onto the bench.

The girls noticed a narrow flight of stairs leading to the second floor.

"I wonder," Nancy mused, "if we might find something up there to wrap around us. Or maybe even some towels to dry ourselves off with. Let's see."

Laura followed Nancy to the rear of the building. Seeing a light switch for the upper story, Nancy turned it and the two girls climbed the steps. To their surprise, the second floor of the bungalow was furnished with two cots and blankets, a table and chairs, tiny refrigerator, a sink, and a two-burner electric stove.

"We're in luck!" Nancy exclaimed happily. "Come on up, Helen," she called.

Laura spotted an open closet in a corner of the room. It was well stocked with food. She held up a can of prepared cocoa.

"Under the circumstances," she said, "I doubt that the owner of this place would object if we made something warm to drink."

Helen and Nancy agreed. Within a short time the three girls had taken off their wet clothing and were wrapped in blankets. Laura had turned on one burner of the stove and made hot chocolate.

"Umm, this is good," Nancy said contentedly.

Both she and Helen again thanked Laura profusely for coming to their rescue, and said they had been trying to get back to the Pinecrest MoteL

"Are you staying there?" Laura questioned.

"For a week," Helen replied. "My Aunt June is coming tomorrow. She was supposed to ride up with us Thursday from River Heights where we live, but was detained. She's going to help design my dress for my marriage to Jim Archer. He's in Europe now on business for an oil company. When he returns to the States, we'll be married."

Nancy Drew asked Laura if she, too, was a summer visitor at the resort. When her question met with silence, Nancy was surprised to see tears gathering in Laura's eyes.

"I'm sorry, Laura," Nancy said instantly. "You've been through a terrible ordeaL You should be resting instead of talking."

"Of course," Helen agreed.

Laura blinked her eyes, then said soberly, "You don't understand. You see, my mother passed away a month ago and—" She could not continue.

Nancy impulsively put an arm around Laura's shoulders. "I do understand," she said, and told of losing her own mother at the age of three.

Helen added, "Nancy lives with her father, a lawyer, and Hannah Gruen, their housekeeper."

"I'm an orphan," Laura stated simply. "My father was in a boat accident nearly six years ago." She explained that Mr. Pendleton's sailboat had capsized during a storm. He had been alone and no one had been near enough to save him.

"That's why," Laura added, "I knew I had to save whoever was crying for help on the lake today. I love to walk in a storm."

Nancy and Helen felt their hearts go out to the parentless girl. Not only was Laura brave, but also she showed great strength of character.

"With whom are you staying now?" Nancy asked Laura.

The girl looked troubled. "I'm alone at the moment. I checked in at the Montewago Hotel just this morning. But my guardian Jacob Aborn and his wife Marian are to arrive some time this evening. They're taking me to their summer home at Melrose Lake. I believe it's near here."

"Yes, it is," Nancy said.

"Do you know the Aborns?" Helen asked.

Laura said that she did not remember the couple. Her mother had frequently spoken of them, however.

"Mr. Aborn is distantly related to my mother, and it was her request that he become my legal guardian in case of her death."

Laura gave a slight sob, then went on, "But no answer came from our lawyer's letter to Mr. Aborn, who was traveling."

"How strange!" Nancy remarked.

"Finally I wrote to Mr. and Mrs. Aborn myself at the Melrose Lake address," Laura said. "The truth was I needed some money as a down payment on tuition at the boarding school I attend."

"And they replied?" Nancy asked.

"Yes. Mr. Aborn told me to come here and he and his wife would meet me."

Helen interrupted. “Then everything’s settled, so you should be happy.”

The girl shook her head. “I feel I’m not wanted. The letter wasn’t cordial. Oh dear, what shall I do?”

Nancy gave Laura a hug. “You’ll be at school and during vacations you can visit friends. And you have a new friend named Nancy Drew!”

“Oh, Nancy, you’re sweet.” Laura smiled for the first time, but in a moment her mood became sad again. “Living that way isn’t like having your own home. Mother and I had such wonderful times together.” She brushed away a few tears.

Nancy wanted to learn more but saw by her waterproof watch that it was six o’clock. Laura would have to hurry off to meet her guardian. The sky was getting lighter and the rain had almost stopped.

“We’d better leave,” she suggested to Helen and Laura.

The girls washed the cups and saucepan, dressed, and put the blankets where they had found them. Before leaving the bungalow, Nancy wrote a note of thanks to the owner, signing it “Three grateful girls.”

As they were parting, Laura said, “If my guardians don’t arrive I’ll call you and arrange a date for tomorrow.”

“Please do!” Nancy and Helen urged, and waved good-by.

When they reached the Pinecrest Motel, the two girls went at once to talk to Mr. Franklin, the manager. They told him about the sunken motorboat, expressing extreme regret, and assured him that their parents would pay for the craft.

“Don’t worry about that,” the manager said. “We have insurance which takes care of such accidents. I’m just glad you girls are all right.”

At that moment a short, thin woman swaggered into the office. Her print dress was mud-splattered and she had lost the heel to one shoe. Her wet, bleached hair clung to her head in an unbecoming fashion.

Ignoring Nancy and Helen, who were still conversing with Mr. Franklin, the woman said bluntly, “Is there anyone here who can change a tire for me? I just had a flat half a mile away.”

“I’m afraid not,” Mr. Franklin apologized. “I’m busy in the office and most of the help are off this evening.”

“That’s great!” the woman said angrily. “What am I supposed to do—walk to the Montewago Hotel? I’m late already!”

Although Nancy thought the stranded motorist was being extremely rude, she, nevertheless, suggested that the woman telephone a nearby service station. “I’m sure they’ll send someone out to help you.”

This idea was received with a snort as sparks of annoyance flashed in the woman’s pale-blue eyes. “I’ll think about that!” she said sarcastically, and, turning, limped toward the telephone booth. She banged the door shut behind her.

The three spectators looked after her with disgust and Helen said, “Some people don’t deserve a helping hand.”

The irate stranger was still in the booth when Nancy and Helen went off to their room on the ground floor. After a bath and change of clothes the girls felt better. A tasty dinner in the restaurant restored their energy and they played shuffleboard under the floodlights.

The next morning, as the two friends dressed, Helen asked, “Do you think Laura Pendleton will call us?” Helen was putting on Bermuda shorts and a candy-striped blouse.

“I imagine so,” said Nancy, “unless her guardian and his wife took her to Melrose Lake last night.”

“How far is that from here?” Helen inquired.

Nancy consulted a road map. “About twenty-five miles,” she replied. Then, as she was putting on loafers, someone knocked on the door. Nancy went to see who it was.

Laura Pendleton stood in the doorway. She looked very pretty in a becoming pink cotton dress. But the girl’s eyes were shadowed and she seemed highly distressed.

“Oh, Nancy—Helen!” Laura exclaimed. “I just had to come see you as soon as I could!”

“We’re glad you did,” Nancy said. “Come in.” Before she could continue, Laura flung herself on Helen’s bed and started to sob.

“What’s wrong, Laura?” Nancy asked in concern, going over to her.

Slowly the girl sat up and wiped away her tears with a handkerchief. She apologized for her behavior, then said, “I don’t think I’m going to be happy living with the Aboms—at least not

with Mrs. Aborn!"

Troubled, Nancy asked Laura whether the guardian and his wife had arrived the evening before.

"Only Mrs. Aborn," Laura replied. "She came to my room about an hour after I left you girls. She was wet and in a very nasty mood. Apparently she'd had a flat tire on the road and was delayed in getting help from some gasoline station."

Nancy and Helen exchanged significant glances. Mrs. Aborn sounded like the woman they had met in Mr. Franklin's office!

"What does your guardian's wife look like, Laura?" Helen asked with interest.

"She's blond, small, and thin. And I guess she was terribly upset about all the trouble she'd had. I understood this and tried to make her comfortable in the extra bedroom, but—"

Laura went on to say that Mrs. Aborn, instead of calming down, had become even more unpleasant, blaming the girl for making it necessary for her to drive to Twin Lakes in the bad storm.

"She said that Mary, my mother, had spoiled me and that I was going to have to toe the mark in her home—Oh, what will I do?" Laura asked.

Nancy did not know, but said Mrs. Aborn's behavior was inexcusable. Then she asked whether Laura's mother had known the guardian's wife well.

Instead of replying to the question, Laura said absently, "Mrs. Aborn called my mother 'Mary.' But, Nancy, Mother's name was Marie!"

CHAPTER III

Strange Guardians

NANCY was almost certain now that she and Helen had met the unpleasant Mrs. Aborn the night before. The woman's quarrelsome mood had extended to Laura.

Aloud Helen said, "But don't forget it's no fun to have car trouble on a bad night. That is apt to make anyone cross."

"I suppose so," Laura conceded.

"How was Mrs. Aborn this morning?" Nancy asked.

Laura's face brightened somewhat as she admitted that the woman had been pleasant and charming. "Mrs. Aborn apologized for her actions last night and said both she and her husband could hardly wait for me to come and live with them."

"I see," said Nancy, but with inward reservations.

"I guess I'm being foolish to worry." Laura smiled. "Mrs. Aborn did say she had met Mother only once, so that could explain the name mix-up."

"Where is Mr. Aborn?" Helen asked.

"He's arriving after lunch today. He was detained on business."

Nancy was puzzled. The Aborns' behavior was unusual and thoughtless, she felt.

"Mrs. Aborn is having her hair set at the beauty parlor in the hotel," Laura explained. "She suggested that I take a taxi here this morning if I felt I had to see you two—which I insisted I did," Laura said, grinning cheerfully.

Suddenly Nancy smiled. "I'm starved." She asked Laura to have a second breakfast with her and Helen in the motel restaurant.

"And afterward," Helen went on, "let's ask Marty Malone—the girl we met yesterday, Nancy —to make a foursome in tennis."

"Great!" said Laura to both suggestions.

When the three girls stepped outside, Nancy took a deep breath of air. She loved the earthy smell of the forests surrounding the lake resort, particularly the scent of the tall pines.

"What a day!" she exclaimed. Only a few fleecy white clouds broke the clear blue sky.

"The weatherman must be on our side." Helen chuckled.

A little later Nancy lent Laura tennis clothes, and the girls went to meet Marty Malone. Soon the four were playing a lively set on the courts located behind the motel. Laura and Nancy, who were partners, won. Helen and Marty took the second set.

"You're a terrific player, Nancy!" Laura exclaimed, as she scored a point during set three.

"Thanks," Nancy said, as they changed courts for service. "Where did you learn to play so well?"

"Private lessons." Laura grimaced. "At boarding school. Mother insisted. Before her illness she was a great sportswoman."

When Nancy and Laura had won the third set, Laura called for time out. "I must go back to the hotel now," she said. "It's almost noon."

After Laura had changed her clothes, Nancy offered to drive her to the hotel. The three girls piled into Nancy's blue convertible. Ten minutes later they drew up in front of the spacious Montewago Hotel. It was several stories high and stood a long distance back from the main road. In front stretched a green lawn bordered by beds of multicolored gladioli, dahlias, and giant asters.

"It's beautiful!" Nancy commented, as Laura stepped from the car.

Helen pointed to an attractive outdoor swimming pool to the right of the hotel. It was filled with bathers. Laura said that there was also a riding stable behind the Montewago.

"There are a lot of families here," Laura said wistfully. "I wish I could stay." Then hastily she thanked Nancy for driving her over.

"I loved doing it," Nancy replied. "I hope we see each other again, Laura."

"So do I," Helen added.

Laura snapped her fingers. "I have a wonderful idea! Why don't you girls come back around three o'clock? You can meet my guardians. And if there's time, we can join the other young people at a tea dance scheduled for four."

"Fine!" Nancy said at once.

"Come directly to my room." Laura waved good-by.

Nancy detected a worried expression on Laura's face, and knew she hated the thought of meeting her strange new guardian.

The young sleuth was so quiet on the return trip that Helen said, "Penny for your thoughts, Nancy."

Her friend smiled. "I've concluded that the Pendletons must have been wealthy."

"What gives you that idea?"

"It's very expensive to live year round in New York hotels where Laura lived and she also mentioned boarding school. In addition," Nancy enumerated, "Laura's clothes have that simple but expensive look—you know what I mean."

"Yes," said Helen. "Well, if you're right, Mr. Aborn will control a great deal of money while he's managing Laura's affairs."

"In the case of a minor," said Nancy, "an inheritance is held in trust until she is twenty-one, Dad says. That's five years for Mr. Aborn. I hope he'll be a wise guardian."

She turned onto Lakeview Lane, a long, straight road bordered by woods. There were no homes along the way but a sign ahead advertised Sterling's real-estate office. Suddenly Nancy stopped.

"I think I'll run in here for a minute," she said, "and ask who owns that bungalow we helped ourselves to."

She walked into the office, introduced herself to Mr. Sterling, an elderly man, and told him the purpose of her call. The realtor grinned. "Any port in a storm is all right, I'm sure."

He said that the bungalow was owned by one of his clients. He had rented it a week before to a Mrs. Frank Marshall from Pittsburgh.

"I guess she fixed up the second floor," Mr. Sterling added. "She and her husband plan to use the place week ends. I'll pass the word along to Mrs. Marshall that you were there."

"I left a note but didn't sign it," Nancy said. "Perhaps some time I'll stop in person and thank the Marshalls."

Returning to the car, she told Helen what she had learned. "Just for fun let's go out to the bungalow now."

A quarter of a mile farther on Nancy made a right-hand turn which brought them out on the lake drive. Below them, the girls could see the bungalow they had visited.

Suddenly a black foreign car pulled out of the lane that led down to the bungalow. Gaining speed, the automobile came toward Nancy's convertible.

"Watch out!" Helen yelled, jerking to attention as the vehicle passed and nearly sideswiped them.

Nancy slowed down and stopped. She looked back at the car which was almost out of sight. "Some drivers don't deserve a license," she said. "Do you suppose that was Mr. Marshall?"

Helen shrugged. "He wore a straw hat pulled low over his forehead. All I could see was the sleeve of his tan-and-white jacket."

"That's quite a bit," Nancy teased, "in so short a time."

Helen laughed. "Close association with you is making me more observant," she said.

When the girls reached the Pinecrest Motel, Helen exclaimed, "There's Aunt June!" While Nancy parked, the dark-haired girl slipped from the convertible and hurried to the porch outside the room they occupied.

"Hello, Helen dear." The slim, stylishly dressed woman, with softly waved black hair, smiled at her niece.

Helen returned the greeting and gave her father's younger sister a kiss. "When did you arrive?" she asked. "Have you been waiting long?"

"No. I got here half an hour ago."

The attractive-looking woman was a buyer for a River Heights department store. She told Helen of a retailing problem which had prevented her departure with the girls, then turned to greet Nancy with enthusiasm.

"Isn't this a lovely spot?" Nancy remarked, and Aunt June Corning agreed that the view of the lake was superb.

After learning that Aunt June had not had lunch, the three went into the tearoom. When they had given their order, Miss Corning said, “I have some slightly bad news for you, Nancy.”

“What’s happened?”

“Well, just before I left River Heights, I phoned your housekeeper to see if she had any messages for you. To my surprise Dr. Darby answered. He said that Mrs. Gruen had sprained her ankle early this morning, and she must not walk for a couple of days.”

“I’ll call Dad right away and talk to him,” said Nancy with concern.

“Wait!” Aunt June said. “Dr. Darby mentioned that your father left on a business trip today before the accident occurred.”

“That means Hannah is all alone,” Nancy said, rising. “I’ll have to go home at once. Will you both excuse me for a minute, please?”

She went to a telephone booth and dialed the Drews’ next-door neighbor, Mrs. Gleason. Nancy was relieved to hear that the woman’s sister was taking care of Hannah for the afternoon. The housekeeper was in no pain and resting comfortably.

The young sleuth did some rapid thinking. If she left for River Heights late that afternoon she could still fulfill her promise to Laura to meet her guardian and arrive home in time to cook Hannah’s supper.

“Will you please tell Mrs. Gruen I’ll see her at six o’clock,” Nancy requested, and Mrs. Gleason agreed to do this.

When Nancy returned to the others, Helen was telling her aunt of the adventure on the lake and Laura Pendleton’s story.

“How dreadful for the girl!” exlaimed Miss Corning. “I feel very sorry for her.”

Nancy now told of her plans to return home, and although Helen and her aunt were disappointed, they agreed that it was the right thing to do.

“But before I leave,” said Nancy, “I want to meet Mr. and Mrs. Aborn.”

After lunch Nancy packed her suitcase, put it in the car, and paid her motel bill. Soon it was time for her and Helen to leave for the Montewago Hotel.

“Are you sure you won’t accompany us, Aunt June?” asked Helen.

Miss Corning shook her head. “I’m a little tired,” she said, “and besides, I must unpack.”

A short while later the two girls entered the Montewago lobby. Nancy made her way directly to the desk and after a brief wait was informed that Miss Pendleton would receive the girls in her suite. An elevator took them to the third floor.

Scarcely had they knocked on the door when Laura opened it. “Oh, I’m so glad you came,” she cried out, smiling with relief.

Laura led the girls into a well-appointed living room with a bedroom on either side. As Nancy stepped inside, she saw a man and a woman seated in chairs near a picture window. In a glance Nancy realized that she and Helen had been right about Mrs. Aborn being the woman they had met the night before. Right now she looked more friendly.

Jacob Aborn arose and smiled graciously. He was a well-built, somewhat stocky man in his early fifties. His face was square, and his small brown eyes were shifty.

When Laura introduced the girls, Mrs. Aborn rushed toward them. “Darlings!” she said, giving Helen and Nancy a butterfly peck on their cheeks. “You’ve been so good to poor Laura.”

“Perfect bricks!” Mr. Aborn said gruffly. He extended a hand first to Nancy, then to Helen. “The reason I’m late in getting Laura is that I want everything to be perfect for her arrival at our Melrose Lake house.”

Nancy was sure Mrs. Aborn recognized the callers and was embarrassed to admit it. They said nothing. There was an awkward silence until Laura said, “Well, let’s all sit down.”

For a few minutes everyone chatted generally, then Helen asked, “When are you leaving, Mr. Aborn?”

“In half an hour,” was the reply. “Laura is tired and I want to get her settled before suppertime.”

Mrs. Aborn broke in, “Yes, the poor child needs a lot of rest and good care.”

Laura Pendleton seemed annoyed to be treated as a child and an invalid. “I’m fine,” she stated defiantly. Turning to Nancy, she said quietly, “I’m afraid that we can’t attend the hotel tea dance.”

“That’s all right,” Nancy replied. She told of Hannah’s accident and the fact that she must soon head for home.

"Are you all packed, Laura?" Mr. Aborn asked.

"Yes, except to get Mother's jewelry from the hotel safe."

"I'll do that for you, dear," Mrs. Aborn volunteered, rising. She smoothed her skirt restlessly.

Laura said, "Thank you, but I must present the receipt in person." She excused herself, saying she would be right back.

As Laura left the suite, Mr. Aborn turned to the two guests. "I wish Marie Pendleton had been a little more cautious with her inheritance from her husband," he confided.

"What do you mean?" Nancy asked.

"Laura is practically penniless," her guardian explained. "Mrs. Pendleton's illness and the way she lived took almost all her funds."

Nancy and Helen were surprised and dismayed to hear this.

"It doesn't matter, though," Mrs. Aborn said. "We have ample means to provide for Laura. She'll have everything she needs."

Nancy was confused by the woman's seemingly dual personality. She could be crude as on the evening before, or sweet as she appeared now. Perhaps, at heart, she meant well. Nancy hoped so for Laura's sake, but a strange feeling of distrust persisted.

When Laura returned, Helen and Nancy said they must be on their way. The friends shook hands.

"We never can thank you enough, Laura, for coming to our rescue yesterday," Helen said gratefully.

"That's right," Nancy agreed. "If you hadn't come along at that moment we'd probably be at the bottom of the lake!"

Laura shuddered. "Oh, I'm sure you would have reached shore some way! But I am glad I could help and it's been such fun knowing you. I hope you'll come to see me while I'm at Melrose Lake."

"We will," Nancy promised. "What is your address there?"

"Anyone can direct you to my house," Mr. Aborn said heartily. "It's well known in that section."

His wife tapped her foot on the floor. "Jacob, it's getting late," she hinted.

Nancy and Helen hastily bade the Aborns good-by and walked toward the door of the suite with Laura. Suddenly Helen turned around.

"It's lucky you brought two cars!" she called back. "Laura has a lot of luggage."

Without another word, Helen gave Laura a quick kiss and walked into the corridor. Nancy followed a moment later.

"Why did you say that?" Nancy questioned Helen as they rode down in the elevator.

The dark-haired girl signaled for silence. There were several other people in the car. When they stepped out into the lobby Nancy repeated her question.

Helen grabbed her chum's arm excitedly. "I couldn't resist it!" she exclaimed. "Jacob Aborn was the driver in the tan-and-white sports jacket I saw coming out of the road by the bungalow this morning! The driver of the black foreign car!"

CHAPTER IV

The Tree Crash

IF HELEN was right about Mr. Aborn's being the driver of the foreign car, then it should be in the hotel parking lot, Nancy thought.

"Let's take a look," she suggested.

The girls walked to the rear of the hotel where Nancy had left her own convertible. They scouted the lot. There was no sign of a black foreign car. Helen asked the attendant if one had been driven in that day. The man said no.

Helen was puzzled. "I was so sure I was right."

"You still could be," said Nancy. "The car may be parked somewhere else. Mrs. Aborn may have picked up her husband at some other point."

Puzzled, she and Helen climbed into the convertible and Nancy started the engine. As she drove back to the Pinecrest Motel, Helen remarked:

"I don't care for either Mr. or Mrs. Aborn. Their friendliness seems forced, and their promises don't ring true."

"I agree." Nancy nodded. "By the way, did you notice how Laura's guardian went out of his way to tell us she was penniless? And we were total strangers."

"I certainly did," Helen replied. "It was in very bad taste, I'd say."

"As soon as Hannah's ankle is better," Nancy declared, "I'm coming back here. Let's pay Laura a visit together at Melrose Lake. I feel very uneasy about her."

"A wonderful idea!" Helen exclaimed.

When they reached the motel, she got out. "I hope Hannah's foot improves quickly," she said, and waved Nancy out of sight.

A minute later Nancy was on the main highway which paralleled Twin Lakes for some distance. Presently, as she left the lake area, Nancy cast a speculative glance toward the sky. Did she imagine it or was it beginning to cloud over?

Nancy glanced at the speedometer. She was nearly halfway to River Heights. "Maybe I can get home before the storm breaks," she told herself.

A quarter of a mile farther on Nancy saw an obstruction in the road and brought the convertible to a halt. A huge sign read:

DETOUR. BRIDGE OUT. TAKE MELROSE LAKE ROAD. An arrow pointed to the left.

"Just when I'm in a hurry!" Nancy fumed, knowing she would have to go miles out of her way before reaching the River Heights road.

Another anxious glance at the sky told her there was no time to be lost. Already huge storm clouds were appearing.

"I'll be caught in another cloudburst like the one on the lake," she thought.

Hastily she headed the car down the Melrose Lake detour, a narrow, rutty road bordered with tall pines and thick shrubbery. Nancy was forced to reduce her speed to ten miles an hour, and even then it seemed as though the car would shake to pieces.

Within a few minutes it grew so dark that Nancy snapped on the headlights. Giant raindrops began to strike the windshield. In a short time they were followed by a blinding downpour, and the deep ruts in the road filled up like miniature streams.

"I'm in for it now," Nancy groaned, as the car crept up a hill.

Before she could reach a level stretch on the other side of the hill, the storm broke in all its fury. Trees along the roadside twisted and bent before the onslaughts of the rushing wind.

It was difficult for Nancy to see the road ahead. She crawled along, endeavoring to keep the convertible's wheels out of deep ruts. As she swerved to avoid a particularly large puddle, a blinding tongue of lightning streaked directly in front of the car.

There was a flash of fire and simultaneously a deafening roar. For an instant, Nancy thought the car had been struck.

Almost blinded, the girl jammed on the brakes in time to hear a splintering, ripping noise. Before her horrified eyes a pine tree fell earthward. The convertible seemed to be directly in its line of fall!

"Oh!" Nancy gasped, as the tree missed her car by inches, landing directly in front of it.

Nancy felt as though she were frozen in her seat. How closely she had escaped possible death! When she was breathing normally again, Nancy ruefully surveyed the tree which blocked the road. What was she to do?

"I can't go back because the bridge is out," she told herself. "And there probably isn't anyone within miles of this place." She suddenly realized she had not seen another car going in either direction.

As Nancy continued to gaze at the fallen tree, she decided it could be moved by two people.

"Too bad I'm not twins," she thought. "I wonder how long it will be before someone comes past here."

Finally Nancy decided to try pulling the tree aside. She reached in the back seat for plastic boots and a raincoat with a hood. After putting these on, she stepped outside.

Gingerly picking her way through the mud and heavy rain, she walked to the fallen pine. She grasped the branches and tugged with all her might. The tree did not budge. Nancy next tried rolling it. This, too, she found was impossible.

"Oh, this is maddening," she thought, feeling completely frustrated.

As another low roll of thunder broke the quietness of the woods, Nancy was delighted to see headlights approaching. A moment later a small jeep pulled up behind her car.

The driver's door opened and a young man's voice said, "Hello there! Having trouble?"

"I sure am," said Nancy, as he walked toward her and stood outlined in the convertible's headlights. He appeared to be about seventeen, had dark hair, and twinkling eyes. Quickly Nancy explained about the fallen tree.

"Wow! You were lucky that it missed you!" the boy cried, then added, "It will be easy for the three of us to move the tree."

"Three?" Nancy questioned.

He laughed. "My sister's in the jeep," he explained, then called out, "Come on out, Cath!"

They were joined by a pretty girl, whom Nancy guessed to be fourteen years old. Introductions were exchanged. The brother and sister were Jim and Cathy Donnell. They lived off the next main highway and were returning home from visiting friends.

"I'm glad we came by," Cathy said. "There's only one house on this road and the people haven't moved in yet for the summer."

After Jim had pulled some tangled pine branches away from the convertible, he and the two girls were able to lift the trunk. Little by little they moved the tree far enough aside so that the cars could drive ahead.

"I'll report this to the highway patrol when we get home," said Jim.

"Thanks so much for your help," Nancy told the brother and sister. "By the way, do you know a Mr. and Mrs. Aborn who live at Melrose Lake?"

"We certainly do," said Cathy. "They're the ones whose house is on this route. It's a lovely place, with a lane leading to the house. You passed it about a mile back. The Aborns just bought the place."

"It's a small world," Nancy observed. She told the Donnells, however, that they were wrong about the Aborns not being at their home, and explained about meeting the couple and Laura Pendleton at Twin Lakes.

Nancy tried to pull the fallen tree aside

"That's funny," said Jim. He explained that his parents had known the Aborns for years. "They used to have a place on the other side of the larger lake, and bought this new house

only a month ago. They mentioned that Laura Pendleton was coming to visit them, but said they were taking an extensive trip first."

"I see," said Nancy, thinking, "Another strange angle to this thing!" Aloud she asked, "Is Mrs. Aborn a blond-haired woman, rather small and slight, Cathy?"

"Yes."

Jim said that he and Cathy must say good-by. Their parents would be worried if they did not arrive home soon.

"We'll tell Mother and Dad about the Aborns and Laura," said Jim. "We're all keen to meet Laura. The Aborns think she must be tops!"

"And we want to introduce Laura to our friends here at the lake," Cathy added.

"Grand!" Nancy said enthusiastically. "Laura has had a pretty sad time recently. She needs friends."

The three said good-by and got into their own cars. As Nancy drove on, she kept mulling over the Aborn-Pendleton enigma. She inferred from the Donnells' remarks that the man and his wife were very acceptable people. But Nancy certainly had not received this impression of them.

"I can't wait to meet them again," she thought, "and see how they're treating Laura."

By the time Nancy reached the end of the detour, the storm was over. A little later she turned into the Drews' driveway and parked near the front porch of the large red-brick house. She climbed from the car and made a dash for the porch with her suitcase.

As she inserted her key in the lock and pushed the front door open, a voice called out from the living room, "Nancy? Is that you?"

"Yes, Hannah. Be right in."

Nancy took off her raincoat and boots and put them in the vestibule closet. Then she hurried into the living room and hugged the motherly-looking woman, who was reclining on the sofa.

"Hannah! I'm so sorry about your ankle. How are you feeling?"

A worried expression faded from the housekeeper's face as she said, "I'm fine, now that you're home. This storm has been dreadful and I was concerned about you being on the road. Helen phoned that you were on your way."

Nancy told of the fallen tree at Melrose Lake, and how it had taken her longer than she had planned to make the trip.

"Goodness!" the housekeeper exclaimed. Then she smiled. "Nancy, you're like a cat with nine lives, the way you so often just miss being injured."

Nancy laughed. Then, becoming serious, she asked, "Where did Dad go?"

"To the state capital," Hannah replied, "and that reminds me, dear—you're to call Mr. Drew at eight tonight—" She gave Nancy a slip of paper with a telephone number on it.

"Did he say what he wanted?" Nancy inquired.

A look of concern appeared on Hannah's face as she said, "Mr. Drew wishes you to help him with an embezzlement case he's investigating!"

CHAPTER V

The Unexpected Prowler

AN EMBEZZLEMENT case! Nancy was excited. What, she wondered, did her father want her to do? The young detective longed to place a call to him immediately, but knew she must wait until eight o'clock.

"Where is Mrs. Gleason's sister?" she asked.

Hannah said that the woman had left a short while before, after hearing that Nancy would be home by suppertime.

"But first she fixed a chicken casserole dish for us," Hannah added. "It's all ready to pop in the oven. My dear, I hate to bother you—"

Nancy grinned mischievously and teased, "You mean you hate to have anyone else but you reign in your kitchen. Don't worry, Hannah, I'll be neat."

"Oh posh!" said Hannah. She blushed and gave Nancy a loving glance.

Humming softly, Nancy went to the modern pink-and-white kitchen. The casserole, which looked tempting, stood on one of the gleaming counter tops. After lighting the oven, Nancy placed the dish inside to heat.

She set two wooden trays with doilies, napkins, and silver. Then, after placing bread and butter on each, Nancy poured two glasses of milk. Lastly, she made a crisp salad of lettuce and tomatoes and marinated it with a tangy French dressing.

While waiting for the casserole, Nancy went back to the living room. Hannah was reading the evening paper.

"You're a wonderful help, dear," the housekeeper said gratefully, looking up. "Tell me, did you enjoy your vacation?"

"It was lovely," said Nancy, and described the resort. She then told Hannah of the adventure on Twin Lakes and of Laura Pendleton and the Aborns.

"Hannah, wouldn't it be nice if Laura could visit us sometime soon?"

"It certainly would."

By now their supper was ready and Nancy brought it in on the trays. After they had eaten, she put the dishes in the washer, then helped Hannah, who was using crutches, upstairs to bed. Nancy then went out to put her car in the garage, and returned to the house just as the clock was striking eight. She went to place the call to Carson Drew.

Nancy looked at the series of numbers on the slip of paper Hannah had given her:

942 HA 5-4727

She dialed the long-distance number, and after one brief ring the phone on the other end was picked up.

"Hotel Williamston," the switchboard operator answered.

"May I speak with Mr. Carson Drew?" his daughter requested.

"One moment, please."

There was a pause, then the operator's voice said, "I'm sorry but Mr. Drew checked out this evening."

"Did he say where he was going?" Nancy inquired in amazement.

The desk clerk said no. Nancy thanked him and hung up, feeling oddly upset. It was unlike her father to change his plans without calling home to tell where he would be. Could anything have happened to him? she wondered.

Since Hannah was asleep, Nancy did not awaken her to discuss the matter. Leaving on a light in the lower hall, she went to her own room and unpacked, deep in thought. As she hung up her dresses in the closet the young sleuth wondered if her father might be following a new clue in another city.

Deciding that this probably was what had happened and that she would hear from her father the next morning, Nancy felt reassured, took a bath, and went to bed. She fell asleep

almost immediately.

Several hours later Nancy was awakened by the sound of a dull thud. She sat up and groped for the bedside light. Turning it on, she got out of bed and slipped into her robe and slippers.

"I hope Hannah hasn't fallen out of bed," Nancy thought worriedly, and hurried down the carpeted hall to the housekeeper's room.

Peering in the bedroom door, Nancy saw that Hannah was sound asleep. Puzzled, Nancy went back to her own room. The girl detective had almost decided she had been dreaming, then she heard an even louder noise.

The creaky window in the ground-floor library was being opened! Someone was entering the house!

Alarmed, Nancy decided to call the police and tiptoed to the bedside telephone in Mr. Drew's room. When the sergeant answered, she told him she would unlock the front door.

Nancy tiptoed quietly down the stairs. Upon reaching the ground floor, she eyed the closed door of the library, located at the far end of the living room. Not a sound came from the library which Mr. Drew used as a study.

With bated breath Nancy moved toward the front door and opened it. At that instant the library door was flung open. A man's dark figure was outlined in the doorway. Nancy's heart skipped three beats.

As Nancy debated whether to run outdoors or upstairs, she heard a loud chuckle. At the same time, a table lamp was turned on.

"Dad!" cried Nancy in disbelief, as color flooded back into her face. "Is it really you?"

"Of course!" said Carson Drew, a tall, distinguished-looking man who right now seemed a little sheepish.

He placed the brief case he was carrying on a table, then walked toward Nancy with outstretched arms. His daughter rushed into them and gave Mr. Drew a loving kiss.

"You're the best-looking burglar I've ever seen!" Nancy declared, and told her father of fearing the house was being entered. Then she clapped a hand to her face. "The police! I notified the police when I heard the window creaking open."

At that very moment father and daughter heard a car stop outside. Two policemen rushed in.

"Where's the burglar?"

"Right here," Mr. Drew confessed. "I forgot my house key. Sorry to put you to this trouble."

The policemen grinned and one said, "I wish all our burglary cases were solved this easy!" A few minutes later the officers left.

Mr. Drew explained to Nancy that he had hesitated about ringing the doorbell and disturbing Mrs. Gruen and Nancy. Recalling that one of the windows in the library did not close completely and needed repair, he removed the screen and opened the window.

"I'm sorry I scared you. I flew home tonight rather unexpectedly and didn't have a chance to let you know, Nancy."

"Has there been a new development in your embezzlement case, Dad?" she inquired.

Mr. Drew nodded. "Yes, but since it's late I suggest we both go to bed. We can talk about it in the morning."

Nancy stifled a yawn. "Good idea," she agreed.

Father and daughter turned off the lights and went upstairs. Both slept soundly until eight o'clock the following morning when Nancy was awakened by Hannah.

"Get up, sleepyhead!" said the housekeeper. Teasingly she prodded Nancy's foot with the tip of a wooden crutch while leaning on another one. "It's a beautiful day!"

Nancy jerked awake, rubbing her eyes. "Hannah!" she gasped. "What are you doing up?"

The housekeeper smiled. "One day of staying off my feet will keep me well for a year," she declared. "Besides, I feel fine this morning."

"But Dr. Darby said—" Nancy began.

"Stuff and nonsense!" Hannah replied tartly. "He left me these crutches to use and that's what I intend to do with them. Nancy, is your father home? I noticed his door is closed."

"Yes, Hannah." Nancy related the burglar scare.

The housekeeper smiled in amusement. Then, with a swish of her skirt, she turned and clumped out of the room. She paused at the door, winked at Nancy, and said:

"Pancakes and sausage at eight-thirty—and you tell your dad that I'm going to squeeze some extra-juicy oranges."

Mr. Drew was awake also. Nancy could hear the buzz of his electric razor! It was good, she

thought, for the little family to be home again.

In half an hour they were seated in the cheerful breakfast room. As they began to eat, Mr. Drew caught up on the latest news and listened with concern to the story of Nancy's two storm adventures.

"I'm grateful that you're here safely beside me," he said gravely.

When the lawyer heard about Laura Pendleton and the Aborns, he frowned. "I agree with you, Nancy, it does sound strange," he said. "But you should not interfere with Laura and her guardians unless she asks you to. They may turn out to be very nice people."

"I agree," said Hannah, then added pointedly, "But if things should prove otherwise, Mr. Drew?"

"Then I'd be happy to help Laura have another guardian appointed by the court," the lawyer replied. "In the meantime, Nancy, let's invite Laura to spend a few days with us very soon."

Nancy beamed. "Thanks, Dad. That's just what I wanted to do."

When the meal was finished and the dishes had been put in the washer, Mr. Drew and Nancy went to his study, a comfortable room with book-lined shelves, deep-seated leather chairs, and a wide, highly polished mahogany desk.

Nancy sat down in a yellow club chair, then said eagerly, "Come on, Dad, don't hold out on me any longer about this case of yours."

Mr. Drew smiled, and absently fingered a glass paperweight. Sitting down, he began to talk.

Mr. Drew's client, a Mr. Seward, was the president of the Monroe National Bank in Monroe. It had branches throughout the country, including one in River Heights. During a recent audit, many valuable securities had been discovered missing from the main bank's vault. Most of the securities were bonds which read "Payable to Bearer."

"How dreadful!" said Nancy. "It means that whoever has the bonds can cash them."

"That's right." Mr. Drew said that the bonds belonged to various bank clients throughout the country. In all cases the clients had inherited money and had asked the bank as custodian to invest it for them. A Mr. Hamilton was put in charge. This was a very common bank procedure: the bank made the investments and paid the dividends to the individual, thus relieving the person of handling his own transactions.

"I was called in on the case," Carson Drew said, "by Mr. Sill, manager of our River Heights branch, when Mr. Seward advised him that a number of the missing securities belong to residents in our community. Mr. Seward felt this was an odd coincidence."

"It is," Nancy agreed. "Have you any idea who might have taken the property?"

Mr. Drew said no. So far the evidence pointed to Mr. Hamilton, although the man was a highly trusted officer.

"What about the people who work in the vault?" Nancy asked, wrinkling her forehead.

"They're being checked on now. Most of these employees have worked for the bank a long time, however. At present two of them are on vacation, so the investigation may take some time."

"Couldn't you find out where they went?" Nancy asked.

"We've tried that," her father replied, "but they're not at their homes and the neighbors don't know where they're vacationing. We'll just have to wait until the men get home."

"I see," Nancy agreed.

"The main thing is," said Mr. Drew, "that Mr. Seward doesn't want any publicity about the theft. The bank will continue to pay dividends to the security holders, of course. My assignment is to find the missing property and the guilty person."

"A big order," said Nancy. "How are you going to do this?"

Carson Drew said he was presently checking on employees other than Hamilton who worked in the custodian department. Also, he was trying to find out if there might be a tie-in between the thief and one or more of the persons whose property was missing.

"There must be several people behind this theft," the lawyer explained. "It's pretty difficult in these times to rob a bank, with all the security measures they employ. Nothing is impossible, however, if a plan is well worked out."

"Sounds like an exciting case, Dad," said Nancy. "What can I do to help?"

In reply Mr. Drew gave Nancy a slip of paper with four names on it and their corresponding River Heights addresses. They were: Mrs. William Farley, Mr. Herbert Brown, Mrs. John Stewart, Mr. Stephen Dowd. None of the names was familiar to the young detective.

"These are the local people whose securities are missing," Mr. Drew said. "Think of some

reason to meet these people," he directed. "See what kind of homes they have, and try to get an insight into their characters. This is a very vague assignment, but I feel you may find out something incriminating about one of them—you see, we have to be very careful not to arouse suspicion in a case of this type."

"I'll do my best," Nancy assured him.

"The out-of-town names I'll check myself," her father explained. "They live in various large cities around the country, so I'll have to be away a good bit during the next few weeks."

"I'll get busy on these names right away," Nancy said. She gave her father a quick hug. "You're an old dear to let me help you!"

"Promise me you'll be careful," the lawyer warned. "An embezzler can be a dangerous person. And in this case whoever is behind the thefts is playing for big stakes."

The young sleuth said she would take every precaution. As Nancy stood up, the telephone rang.

"I'll get it, Dad," she offered, and hurried to pick up the receiver of the hall phone.

A low-pitched feminine voice said tersely, "Nancy? Nancy Drew?"

"Yes. This is Nancy speaking."

As she held on, waiting for the caller's identification, she heard sounds of a scuffle on the other end of the receiver. This was followed by a cry of pain and a loud *crash!*

CHAPTER VI

An Invitation to Sleuth

"WHO is this?" Nancy asked.

But the caller had cut off the connection. What had happened to her? Nancy wondered. Certainly she had sounded very distressed. Nancy hung up and waited for a second call, but the phone did not ring.

"Who was it?" Mr. Drew asked, coming into the hall.

Nancy told what had occurred.

"You didn't recognize the voice?" he remarked.

"No, so I can't call back. Oh dear, someone is in trouble, I just know it. And here I stand helpless to do a thing! It's maddening!"

"It certainly is," her father said. "Well, dear, I must run down to the office." Presently he left the house.

After seeing that Hannah was comfortable, Nancy went to her bedroom and thoughtfully opened the closet door.

"This is as good a day as any to start Dad's investigation," she thought.

Nancy took out a two-piece navy-blue dress which made her look older than her eighteen years. Next, she found a pair of comfortable low-heeled pumps.

For several minutes Nancy experimented with various hair styles. She finally chose a simple off-the-face arrangement. Nancy put on tiny pearl earrings, dusted her nose lightly with powder, and finally added a dash of lipstick.

After she had changed her clothes and given herself a final appraisal, Nancy went to Hannah's room to tell her she was going out for a while.

"Gracious, Nancy," said the housekeeper, giving the girl a sharp glance, "you look awfully businesslike today. Where are you going?"

"Dad asked me to look up something for him," she said. "I'll be back in time for lunch."

"Don't worry about that," said Hannah. "I can get around. Have a good time, dear."

When Nancy left the house she consulted the list Mr. Drew had given her. Mrs. William Farley, the first name on the paper, lived on Acorn Street, seven blocks from the Drew residence.

Nancy set out at a brisk pace, rehearsing in her mind the approach on which she had decided. One of the girl's favorite community projects was a recreational youth center located in downtown River Heights. The center always needed volunteer helpers as well as entertainers for the children.

"A good way to find out something about Dad's suspects," Nancy decided, "is to see how they will respond to a needy cause. And I'll be telling the truth when I say that I'm working for the organization."

This resolved, Nancy soon reached a modest white house which was set back from the street a short distance. The front walk was outlined with pink and white petunias and the grass was well tended.

Nancy rang the bell. The door was opened almost immediately by an elderly woman with wavy white hair and the greenest, most alert, eyes Nancy had ever seen.

"Yes?" she inquired pleasantly.

Nancy introduced herself, then explained the purpose of her call. She was invited inside.

"Please be seated," said the woman, sitting down herself. Nancy chose a Duncan Phyfe rocking chair covered with a black floral print.

The hostess smiled. "I'd be glad to help you with your project, my dear," she said, "although I have no talent. Also, I don't leave this house very much. I'm a recent widow, you see, and I haven't been too well lately."

Nancy expressed sympathy and said she understood completely. She liked this friendly little

woman on first sight.

"Would a small check help your cause?" the widow asked. "Perhaps you could buy some equipment for the children."

"That would be wonderful," Nancy said. "But I'm not soliciting funds."

Mrs. Farley smiled shyly. "I realize this," she said. "But there's so little I can do to help others. Mr. Farley left most of his estate, which was modest, in trust. And I have only a tiny income to live on."

The woman arose, and despite Nancy's protests, went to the desk where she wrote out a check.

Nancy thanked her profusely, for she realized that this was a sacrifice on the widow's part.

"I'm glad I can help," said Mrs. Farley. "Please come see me again and tell me how the youth center is coming along."

Nancy promised to do this. After a few more minutes of conversation, she bade Mrs. Farley good-by and left the house.

"If I'm a judge of human nature," thought Nancy, "that woman never did a mean thing in her life!"

When she reached the sidewalk, Nancy took out Mr. Drew's list from her handbag. Thoughtfully she crossed out Mrs. Farley's name.

Herbert Brown, the next suspect, lived in River Heights Estates, a rather exclusive housing area located on the outskirts of the city.

"It's kind of a long walk," Nancy told herself. "But it will do me good."

As Nancy strolled along, she was so engrossed with her thoughts that she failed to notice a tan sedan whose driver cruised by, honked the horn, then pulled over to the curb.

As the door opened, a good-looking young man about eighteen called, "Hi, Nancy!"

To her surprise, she saw Don Cameron, who had been a fellow student in River Heights High School. Nancy had, in fact, gone to the Spring Prom with the tall, black-haired boy.

"Hello, Don," she said. "What are you doing home? I thought you were working on your uncle's farm this summer before going to college."

Don grinned engagingly. "I've been picking string beans and berries and hoeing potatoes for nearly a month," he replied. "But I have a leave of absence to attend my sister's wedding this Friday."

Nancy had read of Janet Cameron's wedding plans in the *River Heights Gazette* two weeks before. "Jan must be excited!" she exclaimed.

"Everyone at home is going 'round in circles," Don stated, laughing. "Bill Bent, my brother-in-law-to-be, is no better.

"By the way, Nancy," Don continued, "I intended calling you later today. If you're free Thursday afternoon and evening I'd like to have you go to a barbecue party with me. It's being given in honor of Jan and Bill."

"I'd love to," said Nancy. "Where will it be?"

"At the Herbert Browns' home in River Heights Estates," Don said. "Their daughter, Lynn, is Jan's maid of honor."

Herbert Brown! One of the possible suspects in the bank security theft! Nancy could scarcely conceal her excitement. Although she did not like the idea of spying on a host, here was an excellent chance for her to find out what Mr. Brown was like.

"What time does the barbecue begin?" Nancy asked.

"I'll call for you at four," said Don.

He offered to drive Nancy home, and she hopped in beside him. When the young sleuth entered the house, she found Hannah in the living room.

"My goodness," the housekeeper exclaimed, "you haven't solved the mystery already!"

"I gave up," Nancy teased.

"What!"

With a grin Nancy told why she had postponed her trip. "I'll get some lunch for us," Nancy offered, "and then drive to the other two places on the list."

Hannah chuckled. "Since you said you'd be home," she said, "I prepared a fresh fruit salad —it's in the refrigerator. And rolls ready to pop into the oven."

"You're a fine patient!" Nancy scolded.

"I feel better keeping busy," Hannah countered.

Nancy asked whether there had been any telephone calls in her absence.

"No. But you did get a post card in the mail." Nancy went to the mail tray in the hall and

recognized Helen Corning's writing. The message read:

Dear Nancy:

Aunt June and I have decided to take a week's automobile trip up North. Will return directly to River Heights. Plan to stop and see Laura Pendleton on our way. Hope Hannah is better.

Love,
Helen

Nancy read the card aloud and commented, "I hope Helen lets me know how everything is at the Aborns' home. Anyway, I'm going to call Laura myself in a few days to find out how she is and make a date with her to come here."

"Do you think her guardian will let her leave his care so soon?" the housekeeper asked, as she reached for her crutches.

When there was no reply, Hannah looked out toward the hall. Nancy's normally rosy complexion was deadly white. She looked as if she were about to faint!

CHAPTER VII

A Startling Assignment

"NANCY! Nancy! What's wrong with you?" Hannah cried out, as she tried to hurry to the girl's side.

As the housekeeper limped toward her, Nancy snapped to attention. "I'm all right, Hannah," she said. "But Helen's post card—it brought back the phone call I had this morning —"

Nancy told Mrs. Gruen about the call which had ended so abruptly with a cry of pain. "The caller's voice sounded vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place it," she explained. "Now I think I know who it was."

"Who?" said Hannah.

"Laura Pendleton! I believe someone was trying to stop her from talking to me!"

"Mercy!" Hannah exclaimed, sinking weakly into a soft chair. "Do you think it was one of the Aborns, Nancy? And why would they do such a thing?"

Nancy shrugged. "I'm going to call the Aborn home right now."

While Hannah listened nervously, Nancy picked up the phone and dialed Information. When the operator replied, Nancy asked for Jacob Aborn's number.

The operator cut off for a minute, then reported, "I'm sorry, miss, but that number has been temporarily disconnected!"

"Can you tell me when this was done?" Nancy requested tersely.

"I'm sorry. I have no further information."

Nancy thanked the operator and hung up.

"It sounds suspicious," Hannah remarked, "but, Nancy, the Aborns may have changed their plans and gone away with Laura for a vacation somewhere else."

"I know one way to find out," said Nancy with determination. She reminded Hannah of the young couple, Cathy and Jim Donnell, who had helped move the fallen tree at Melrose Lake.

"I'll ask them if they've seen Laura or the Aborns," Nancy explained.

Hannah sighed. "You're just like your father," she said, "and he certainly is astute. But I'm worried that you're becoming involved in another complicated mystery."

Nancy tweaked Hannah's cheek. "The more there are, the better I like them!"

The housekeeper smiled. She said that while Nancy was calling Cathy and Jim she would put lunch on the table.

"Fine. I'll help you in a moment."

As Hannah hobbled to the kitchen, Nancy got the Donnells' number and dialed it. After two rings a girl's voice said, "Hello!"

"Cathy?" Nancy inquired.

"Yes."

Nancy gave her name. "Do you remember me?" she asked.

"Of course," said Cathy. "My family and I were talking about you just a short while ago. Jim and I told them about the Aborns' being home and we all went over this morning to say hello and meet Laura. But the house was closed. Nobody's staying there."

"Oh!" said Nancy, disappointed. She explained that this was her reason for calling, and told of the Aborns' telephone having been disconnected.

Cathy already knew this, and added, "Dad found a note on the back porch telling the milkman to discontinue deliveries until further notice."

"Cathy, does Mr. Aborn own a foreign make of car?" Nancy queried.

"Why, no," Cathy replied. She added that her parents thought the Aborns might have planned suddenly to take a short trip somewhere. "I'm sure that we'll hear from them in a few days. If we do, I'll call you, Nancy."

"Fine," said the young detective. "Remember me to Jim. Good-by."

Deeply troubled, Nancy went to the kitchen and told Hannah what Cathy had said.

"Chances are," said the housekeeper, "the call you received this morning was not from Laura at all. You know a lot of people, dear."

Nancy replied that usually when someone had to break a telephone conversation in an abrupt manner the person called back as soon as possible to explain what had happened.

"That's true," Hannah admitted. "It's very strange."

After lunch Hannah said she was going next door to visit with Mrs. Gleason. Nancy helped her to the neighbor's front porch. Then Nancy backed her convertible from the garage and headed for Mr. Drew's downtown office.

"I'll report my progress so far regarding his suspects."

Nancy parked the car in a lot adjoining a large building where lawyers, doctors, and other professional people had offices. Mr. Drew's suite was on the fifth floor. A few minutes later Nancy greeted her father's secretary, Miss Hanson.

"My, how pretty you look, Nancy!" said the efficient young woman, who had been with Carson Drew for the past five years.

"Thank you." Nancy blushed a trifle. "You look lovely yourself."

When the lawyer learned that his daughter had arrived, Carson Drew at once asked Nancy to come into his office.

"I can see by the gleam in your eyes, Nancy, that you have some information for me."

Nancy told him of her interview with Mrs. Farley. "In my opinion, she's a woman of very fine character." Then Nancy mentioned the invitation to the barbecue party at Mr. Herbert Brown's home.

Mr. Drew raised his eyes and chuckled. "Better than I expected."

"My main reason for coming was to tell you something else," Nancy said.

She quickly reviewed the latest developments in the Laura Pendleton case. Mr. Drew listened quietly. Finally he said:

"There's something odd about all this. Nancy, I must leave River Heights on the three-o'clock plane this afternoon for Cincinnati, but I'll be home by Sunday. Why don't we plan to drive to the Aborns' home later that afternoon and see for ourselves what the story is? They may have returned by then."

"That's a grand idea!" Nancy exclaimed. Then, knowing that he was busy, she kissed her father good-by and wished him a successful trip.

"I'll call you every night at eight!" Mr. Drew promised, and Nancy left the office.

On the way down in the elevator, Nancy asked Hank, the operator, if he knew where Hilo Street was located. Mrs. John Stewart, the third suspect, lived in an apartment at this address.

"I know the general area," Nancy added. "It's about three miles from here on the eastern side of the city."

"That's right," Hank said. "It's a classy neighborhood! All high-priced apartment buildings. I believe Hilo Street runs off East Main."

Nancy thanked him, then went to her convertible. She drove carefully through the city traffic and finally reached Hilo Street. Mrs. Stewart's apartment house was Number 76.

Nancy scanned the buildings and found that this one was the largest on the street. It was ultramodern in design and about twenty stories high. After parking her car, she smoothed her hair and got out.

A red-coated doorman nodded pleasantly to the young detective as she entered the building a minute later. Nancy checked the directory and saw that Mrs. Stewart was in Apartment Three on the fourth floor. She rang the elevator button.

Almost instantly, aluminum doors slid open noiselessly, and Nancy stepped inside the carpeted elevator. It was self-operated, and Nancy pushed the fourth-floor control.

Her heart was pounding with excitement. Would Mrs. Stewart prove to be a link in the embezzlement case? Nancy hoped to find a clue this time!

When the elevator stopped at the fourth floor, Nancy got out and easily located Apartment Three. She pressed the doorbell.

A trim-looking maid, a rather harassed expression on her pretty face, opened the door immediately. "Oh, hello!" she said. "You must be the walker."

"Why, no—" Nancy began, but before she could explain, the maid went into the living room, leaving the door ajar.

As Nancy, speechless, glanced hastily into the apartment beyond, the maid reappeared. She was leading a pair of frisky black-and-white French poodles by a gold-linked leash.

“Here!” she said abruptly, thrusting the leash into Nancy’s hand. “Their names are Irene and Frederika. Mrs. Stewart says to take them for a nice, long walk!”

Before Nancy could utter a word, the door was closed with an emphatic bang!

CHAPTER VIII

The Frightened Runaway

NANCY DREW, dog tender! This was a new title, the young detective thought. As she burst into laughter, the two poodles began to yap excitedly and dance around in little circles.

"Hello, girls," Nancy said to them, and bent down to pat the friendly animals. She then rang the doorbell with determination.

This time the door was opened by a tremendously stout woman whose chubby face was framed by a mass of fuzzy brown curls.

"Yes?" she inquired coyly. "Have you had some trouble with the babies? I told Collette to give you explicit instructions."

Nancy smothered a giggle. "Are you Mrs. Stewart?" she asked briskly.

"Of course," the woman said impatiently.

Nancy introduced herself and said that a mistake had been made. She was not the dog walker, but had come to solicit Mrs. Stewart's aid for the River Heights Youth Center.

"Oh dear!" Mrs. Stewart blushed, obviously flustered. "Collette's made a mistake. I'm sorry." She jerked the leash from Nancy and gave the poodles a loving glance. "Mama will give you both cookies while we wait for your real walker."

Nancy cleared her throat and Mrs. Stewart's glance returned to the caller. "Oh, yes—your project. I'm afraid that we'll have to discuss it another time. I'm having an afternoon musicale featuring the most divine violinist—Professor Le Bojo. He is expected any moment—"

"I understand," Nancy nodded. "Perhaps I can return later when Mr. Stewart is home?"

"He left today for a fishing trip in Maine," Mrs. Stewart replied. She added somewhat angrily, "I simply don't understand Gerald—he doesn't appreciate our home life here with the children!" Her glance swept toward the poodles.

Nancy managed to keep a straight face, said good-by to Mrs. Stewart, and left. When she returned to her car Nancy reached the conclusion that Mrs. Stewart was hardly the type to plan a bank swindle!

"Her poor husband," Nancy thought with a laugh.

There was only one more name for Nancy to check today—Mr. Stephen Dowd. She drove out Hilo Street and headed across the city. The man's address was in a business zone which was partly residential, although most of the homes were two-family dwellings.

After a little difficulty, Nancy found the house she sought—a brown duplex situated between a gasoline station and a tailor shop. She parked and went up the walk. Mr. Dowd's half of the house was on the right-hand side.

The young sleuth rang the bell and waited. No answer. She pushed the button again. Still no one came to the door.

"Maybe I can find out something from his next-door neighbor," Nancy thought hopefully.

As she was about to ring the bell on the left, the door was opened by a young woman, a shopping bag in her hand. She appeared startled to see Nancy.

The young sleuth smiled pleasantly. "I came to call on Mr. Dowd," she explained. "He's probably at work?"

"No. Mr. and Mrs. Dowd are both away now—on tour with a show, they said. They board here. I'm Mrs. Wyman."

"Are they entertainers?" Nancy inquired with interest, and explained about the youth center.

Mrs. Wyman said the couple were actors, but she did not know what parts they played. "Since moving here two months ago, they've been away a great deal of the time."

Nancy thanked Mrs. Wyman and said she would call again. "They sound like the type of people I'm looking for to help amuse the children," she explained.

Nancy drove away, but told herself they would bear further investigation. It seemed

unnatural that they would not have told what parts they were playing.

Nancy felt a little discouraged about her findings so far. She realized that she could do nothing else until she met Herbert Brown the next afternoon.

"I think I'll go home, get my bathing suit, and head for the club," she decided. The day was becoming very warm.

Fifteen minutes later Nancy parked in her driveway. As she was about to insert her key in the front lock, the door was opened from inside.

Laura Pendleton, wan and disheveled, stared at the young detective!

"Laura!" Nancy gasped. She could hardly believe her eyes.

"Hello, Nancy," her friend said, as Hannah Gruen came into view, walking slowly on her crutches.

"Come in, Nancy," the housekeeper invited urgently. "Laura's been waiting for you over an hour. She's terribly upset—"

The three went into the living room and Nancy sat down on the couch beside the visitor. Before Nancy could ask why she was in River Heights, Laura burst into tears.

"Oh, I'm so unhappy!" she sobbed. "That's why I ran away!"

Nancy gently stroked Laura's hair and waited for the hysterical girl to calm down. Then she said quietly, "Tell me everything that has happened since I saw you last."

Slowly Laura started to speak. After Nancy and Helen had left the hotel suite, Mr. Aborn said he had to attend to some business for a short while. He had left the hotel. Meanwhile, Laura and Mrs. Aborn had checked out and waited for the guardian in his blue sedan, which was parked in the hotel lot.

"Where did Mr. Aborn go?" asked Nancy.

"I don't know, but when he met us a short while later he was carrying a brief case. As we started toward Melrose Lake, Mrs. Aborn asked what I had done with Mother's jewelry. When I said it was in my handbag she asked me to give it to her for safekeeping. I said I would when we got home."

"Then you *did* go directly to Melrose Lake?" Nancy questioned.

"Yes," Laura replied. She hesitated, then went on with her story. "The Aborns showed me to my room and I started to unpack.

"I found I needed more hangers," the girl went on, "but when I went to the door to ask Mrs. Aborn for them, I discovered it was locked on the outside."

"Locked!" Hannah gasped and Nancy was shocked.

Laura nodded. "I was so frightened," she said, "that at first I didn't know what to do. Then I heard voices coming from the Aborns' room. I lay down on the floor so I could hear them better and listened.

"Marian Aborn said, 'What did you lock her in for—she doesn't know anything!' and my guardian replied, 'Not yet, but she's a smart kid. See if you can gain her confidence and get hold of the jewels.' "

As Laura paused, a terrible thought came to Nancy. Were the Aborns *thieves?* But they could not be, she argued, if Marie Pendleton had trusted the couple to take care of her daughter. "And besides, I gather the Donnells think they are nice people." Aloud she asked, "What happened next?"

"I thought I must have heard them wrong," the auburn-haired girl said slowly, "but I suddenly remembered Mother telling me always to take good care of her jewelry. So I took it from my handbag and hid it underneath the mattress of the bed.

"Just as I finished doing this, the door to my room opened. Mrs. Aborn stood there, looking very friendly. She offered to help unpack my bags, and admired several dresses as I hung them in the closet—"

"And then—" Nancy pressed.

Laura said that she and Mrs. Aborn had prepared a tasty dinner, then she and the couple had watched television for a while.

"Just before we went upstairs to bed, Mrs. Aborn said it would be a good idea for me to put my mother's jewels in the wall safe in the living room. I agreed and said that I would give them to her in the morning."

"What was Mrs. Aborn's reaction to this?" Hannah asked.

"Oh, both she and her husband became very angry. They said that apparently I didn't trust them to take care of a few insignificant gems, while they in turn had the responsibility of caring for a penniless orphan! Oh, Nancy, I thought Mother had a lot of money! Mrs. Aborn

yelled at me and said I was ungrateful and a big burden to them. They were sorry they had ever agreed to take met

"I can't explain how I felt," Laura went on, her hands shaking with nervousness. "I was just numb. Then I burst into tears and rushed to my room."

Laura said that finally she had fallen asleep and awakened this morning to find she was again locked in.

"At eight o'clock Mrs. Aborn opened the door, acting very friendly, and said breakfast was ready in the kitchen."

"Was anything said about last night?" Nancy asked.

Laura said no, that the Aborns had acted as though nothing had happened. "But a strange thing occurred after breakfast," Laura stated. "Mr. Aborn took a small package from the refrigerator and left the house, saying he would be back later. Before he went he said I would be sorry if I didn't co-operate with them!"

"I presume he meant to hand over the jewels," Hannah guessed, and Laura nodded.

"I knew then that I had to leave their house and also get word to Nancy. While Mrs. Aborn was emptying the rubbish I tried to use the phone, but she caught me and twisted my arm, then hung up the receiver!"

"You see, I was right, Hannah!" Nancy exclaimed, and told Laura her theory about the call.

"Were you locked up again?" Hannah asked.

Laura explained that before Mrs. Aborn could do this she had run past her and barricaded herself inside the bedroom, not wanting the jewels to be unguarded. At that moment the doorbell had rung. Apparently Mrs. Aborn had not answered it, for the woman had kept quiet for a long while on the first floor.

"So I quickly took my handbag and the jewels, and climbed down a trellis outside my window," Laura said. "Once I was on the detour I was lucky enough to get a ride to the highway and there I caught a bus to River Heights. I took a taxi to your house."

As Laura sat back with an exhausted sigh, Hannah stood up. "You're worn out, dear," the housekeeper said. "I'm going to get you a cup of hot tea and you're not to say another word until you've drunk it!"

With that, she bustled out of the room and returned shortly with a small tray on which was a cup of hot tea and a piece of toast. By the time Laura had finished the snack, color had returned to her cheeks and she looked more relaxed.

"I wonder if we should report your experience to the police," Nancy mused.

"What could we tell them?" Laura quavered.

"That's the point," Nancy continued. "We could tell them that the Aborns tried to get your jewels, but of course they would deny it all. It would be their word against yours."

"And I don't have definite proof!" Laura said dejectedly.

Nancy patted the girl's hand. "We'll do everything we can to help you, Laura. You've really had a terrible experience, you poor girl."

"Nancy, you're a real friend," Laura said. Tears came into her eyes. "Mr. Aborn is my legal guardian—I saw the papers—but what am I going to do?"

"You'll stay with us," Hannah said quickly, "and when Mr. Drew comes home he'll know how to handle the situation."

Nancy was quiet, but she was doing a lot of figuring. Something mysterious was going on at Melrose Lake. She intended to find out for herself what it was.

CHAPTER IX

A Valuable Inheritance

IF IT had been possible Nancy would have started out for Melrose Lake at once, but she felt that Laura needed her. Besides, there was a job to do for her father at the Browns' barbecue next day.

"Helping Dad comes first," Nancy decided.

Laura spoke again of her mother's affairs. "She used to say I'd always be financially independent if anything happened to her."

"We'll find out," Nancy said, and then took Laura upstairs so she might shower and rest.

In the meantime, Nancy selected some of her own clothes for the visitor. When she appeared at the dinner table, Hannah declared that Laura looked pretty as a picture and much more relaxed.

"I am—thanks to both of you," their guest said gratefully.

When the meal was finished the two girls sat out on the Drews' porch. To cheer up her guest, Nancy told Laura of her funny experience with the French poodles, while trying to get volunteers for the youth center. The young detective did not mention her real reason for calling at the apartment.

Laura giggled. "I wish I could have been with you," she said. "Tell me, Nancy, have you any souvenirs of the mysteries you've solved?"

"Two trophies." Nancy displayed a mantel clock and a valuable silver urn. Laughingly she told Laura that her father often said she would have the house cluttered before she finished her career!

Just then the telephone rang and Hannah called from upstairs that Mr. Drew was on the line. Nancy hurried to talk with him.

"Nancy, I've come across some evidence that indicates Mr. Hamilton, or some person working for him in the trust department, was behind the security thefts. A detective is tailing Hamilton, and if he tries to leave town, the Monroe police will be notified."

"How about the others in his department?" Nancy asked.

"They're being watched, too, but not so steadily. Of course we don't want to arrest an innocent man."

Nancy said she hoped the guilty person would make a misstep soon so the case might be solved, and told her father what she had learned of the River Heights suspects since she had seen him.

He suggested that she keep trying to contact the Dowds. "And that reminds me," the lawyer said. "You can forget about Mr. Herbert Brown being suspicious." He explained that Brown was a personal friend of the bank president's and had been cleared.

Nancy was relieved to hear this. "I'll keep trying to get in touch with the Dowds," she promised.

Next, she told her father about Laura Pendleton's flight from the Aborns' home. "Do you think we should report her experience with them to the police?" she asked.

Mr. Drew said no, that so far the two girls had only their suspicions of the couple's dishonesty, even though Laura had overheard them talking about her jewels. "You need some concrete evidence before calling in the authorities," he stated.

"I thought I'd run up to Melrose Lake and do some sleuthing," she said.

"All right, but keep out of danger," he warned. "I'll be eager to hear what you find out. We'll have a conference when I get home and decide what we can do for Laura."

"Thanks, Dad." A moment later they bade each other good night and hung up.

As the teen-aged detective started for the porch, she had an inspiration. It was not essential now for her to meet Herbert Brown. If Don Cameron would agree to take Laura as a substitute to the barbecue party, it would leave Nancy free to go to Melrose Lake the next day!

"I'll ask Don if he'd mind. If he does—well, that's that."

Hopefully Nancy dialed the Cameron house. Don answered and the girl detective told him the problem.

"Wow! A real mystery!" he remarked. "If I didn't know what sleuthing means to you, Nancy, I'd say you were just trying to brush me off. But you have me feeling sorry for this Laura Pendleton, too. Okay. If she's willing to go with me, I'll be glad to take her. But I'm sure sorry you can't make it. See you another time."

"Thanks, Don. I shan't forget this. Of course if Laura won't go, I'll keep the date. 'By now."

As Nancy walked toward the porch, she smilingly crossed her fingers, hoping that Laura would agree to the plan. Stepping outside, Nancy asked, "How would you like to go to a barbecue tomorrow, Laura?"

The girl's face glowed with anticipation. "It would be fun!" she exclaimed. "Where, Nancy?"

When the plan was explained, Laura said, "Oh, but I don't want to take your date away from you."

"Don and I have already arranged everything," Nancy assured her. Then she told of her desire to do some sleuthing at Melrose Lake.

At once Laura said she was afraid to have Nancy go to the Aborns' home. "There's no telling what my guardian might do to you," she said fearfully. "He has a terrible temper, and if he learns you're helping me—"

"He won't learn that," Nancy said determinedly.

Reluctantly Laura agreed to Nancy's whole scheme. "But if anything should happen to you, I—I'd just want to die!" she declared.

Before the girls went to bed, Hannah suggested that Laura's jewelry be put into the wall safe in Mr. Drew's study.

"Dad, Hannah, and I are the only persons who know the combination," Nancy told Laura.

"It would be a good idea," the brown-eyed girl replied. "First, I'd like to show you some of Mother's treasures. She gave them to me before her last illness."

"Do you have this in writing?" Hannah asked.

"Yes, I do. Why?"

"Then the jewelry wouldn't be part of your mother's estate," Mrs. Gruen answered, "and there'd be no tax on it."

Laura took a package from her handbag and opened it. She displayed a string of priceless matched pearls, a gorgeous diamond clip and earrings, several jeweled pins set with rubies, pearls, and emeralds, and six rings, including one with a brilliant star sapphire.

Nancy and Hannah were astounded. "Why, this is the most beautiful collection I've ever seen!" Nancy exclaimed. She pointed to a ring set with a perfect aquamarine. "I love this!"

Laura smiled. "That was Mother's favorite," she said. "My father gave it to her on their first wedding anniversary."

"Thank goodness your guardian didn't find these things!" Hannah declared.

Finally the jewels were put into the safe and everyone went to bed.

Nancy awoke at seven o'clock the next morning. After taking a shower, she decided to wear a forest-green cotton dress and flat-heeled brown play shoes.

Laura was still sleeping when Nancy joined Mrs. Gruen at breakfast. The housekeeper was using a cane.

"My ankle feels almost as good as new," Hannah announced. "I've discarded the crutches."

Nancy was delighted to hear this. As they ate, she and the housekeeper talked about the young sleuth's trip.

"I'll worry about you every second until you return home," Mrs. Gruen declared. "If you're not here by ten thirty, I'll notify the police."

Nancy grinned. "I'll try to be here by suppertime. If not, I'll call you."

A short while later Nancy battled the early-morning traffic through the city. Reaching the outskirts, she took the road to Melrose Lake.

"Poor Laura," she thought, wondering what the day would disclose about the girl's strange guardian and his wife.

If Laura were really penniless, maybe the man thought he had a legitimate right to take and sell the jewelry for the girl's support. But his wife had bragged about having plenty of money to take care of their ward.

After a time Nancy came to the Melrose Lake detour. Laura had told her there was a sign

marked “Eagle Rock” in front of the lane leading to her guardian’s property.

Presently Nancy approached the spot where the pine tree had fallen. Fortunately, it had been removed.

She drove more slowly, afraid of inadvertently missing the Eagle Rock sign. Then, sighting the turnoff, Nancy left the detour.

“This ring was Mother’s favorite,” Laura said

She had gone but a few hundred feet along the Aborns’ road when she decided it might be safer to walk. After parking along the side of the roadway, she started off. In a few minutes Nancy suddenly caught sight of a man walking rapidly through the woods. He carried a small bundle under his arm.

"Jacob Aborn!" she thought, recognizing his profile and the peculiar stoop of his shoulders.

Nancy recalled Laura's story of her guardian taking a small package from the refrigerator and leaving the house with it. What was in the bundle and where was he taking it?

"I'm going to find out!" Nancy declared. Without hesitation, she quietly plunged into the thicket. Following at a safe distance she managed to keep the man in sight.

"He doesn't seem to be worried about being followed," Nancy thought. "He must not have heard my car when I turned into the lane." She continued her musing. "I'm glad I wore this green dress. It's good camouflage!"

Just then a twig crackled under her foot, breaking the stillness of the woods. Jacob Aborn turned and looked back, frowning. He stood a minute, listening intently. Only by ducking quickly behind a large bush had Nancy avoided detection.

"I'd better be more careful if I don't want to get caught," she warned herself.

As the man continued through the forest Nancy followed, painstakingly avoiding twigs or loose stones. She kept well behind him.

"Wouldn't it be a joke on me if he's just a bird watcher!" She giggled at the thought. "And maybe that package has his lunch in it!"

Laughing to herself, Nancy picked her way through the woods as she trailed Laura Pendleton's guardian. Suddenly he disappeared behind a clump of high blueberry bushes. Nancy hurried forward. When she reached the spot the girl detective looked about in all directions.

"Which way did he go?" she asked herself.

Jacob Aborn seemed to have vanished into thin air!

CHAPTER X

The Danger Sign

ALERT for possible danger, Nancy moved forward with the utmost caution. It occurred to her that possibly Aborn had become aware he was being followed and had hidden in the bushes to watch the pursuer.

"I'll walk into a trap!" Nancy thought with alarm. "Mr. Aborn will learn I'm spying on him and everything will be ruined!"

With great caution she moved from one bush and tree to another. Laura's guardian was not hiding behind any of them.

"That's funny," Nancy said to herself.

She examined the ground, almost expecting there would be a cave or secret tunnel in the vicinity. But the earth was firm and in many places very rocky.

Finally Nancy came to a tiny clearing. On the far side attached to a large oak was a crudely printed wooden sign which read:

PRIVATE PROPERTY. KEEP OUT. DANGER!

"I wonder if that's where Mr. Aborn went and why?" the young detective asked herself.

She waited several minutes, then decided to cross the clearing. She was not stopped. Entering the woods again, she saw a dilapidated shack. The windows had been boarded up, and the roof sagged.

"One good gust of wind would blow the place over," Nancy said to herself.

She stepped from among the bushes and stood in the shadow of the trees, curiously surveying the building. Was it possible that Jacob Aborn had entered it?

Nancy's eyes searched the ground for footprints. Directly ahead, in the soft earth, she saw the fresh mark of a man's shoe. Instantly her suspicions were confirmed.

Jacob Aborn had come this way!

"I'll just have a look at this shack," the young sleuth decided.

After quickly glancing about to make certain she was not being watched, Nancy hurried forward. Tiptoeing across the front porch, she quietly tried the door. It was locked. Nancy walked around to the rear door and found that it likewise was securely fastened.

Although disappointed, Nancy was unwilling to give up. Making a complete circuit of the shack, she saw a window from which several boards had fallen. It was too high for her to peer through. Nancy returned to the rear of the building to get an old box that she had seen. She set it beneath the window and mounted it.

Pressing her face against the glass, she gazed inside. The room, apparently a kitchen, was bare of furniture and covered with dust and cobwebs.

"I wish I could get inside," Nancy thought.

She was about to climb down from the box when a strange feeling came over her. Though she had heard no sound, Nancy sensed that unfriendly eyes were watching her every move.

Before she could turn around and look over her shoulder, a coarse, angry voice barked into her ear:

"What are you doing here, young lady?"

Nancy wheeled and faced Jacob Aborn!

With as much dignity as she could muster, the girl detective stepped to the ground and regarded the man with composure. His eyes burned with rage.

"I was merely curious," Nancy replied. "And may I ask why you are here?"

"Yes, I'll tell you. I'm looking for my ward."

"You mean Laura Pendleton?"

"Yes. Who else? I thought maybe she was hiding here. But nobody's in the shack."

"Why in the world would Laura hide in this ramshackle place?" Nancy asked, trying to show as much surprise as possible.

"Search me," Mr. Aborn said, then added angrily, his eyes boring Nancy's, "Laura has run away!"

"Run away?" Nancy repeated.

"Yes. Yesterday. I'll tell you something about that ward of mine—" A crafty light came into Jacob Aborn's eyes as he went on, "At times she acts unbalanced—thinks folks don't treat her right."

"Indeed?" said Nancy, pretending to be shocked.

By now Laura's guardian had calmed down. When he spoke again he was once more the pleasant man Nancy had met at the Montewago HoteL

"It's for Laura's own good that she ought to return home," he said. "Mrs. Aborn is dreadfully upset. She loves Laura just like a mother. Miss Drew, have you heard from Laura by any chance?"

Nancy was on her guard. "Why should I hear from her?" she countered. "We never met until that accident on the lake and she came to rescue my friend Helen and me."

Mr. Aborn did not pursue the subject. Instead, he said, "Laura's a nervous, high-strung girl. Why, do you know she locked herself in her room the entire time she was with us—wouldn't eat, or even let us try to help her?"

"Terrible!" Nancy said, pretending to be shocked. "Laura does need help."

Secretly Nancy felt that Jacob Aborn was telling this version of the locked-door story to cover his own actions, in case they came to light.

"Have you notified the police, Mr. Aborn?" she asked, probing for further information.

"We have a private detective working on the matter," the man stated. "We don't want any bad publicity because of dear Marie Pendleton's memory. She entrusted Laura to my care because she knew how much my wife and I would love the girl."

Nancy suddenly was finding it hard to concentrate on what Mr. Aborn was saying. Was she wrong or had she heard a sound inside the shack?

"This is very strange," she told herself. "But I don't dare pursue the subject or Mr. Aborn will really become suspicious." Aloud she said, "I certainly hope Laura is all right. Well, I must go now. I have some friends here at Melrose Lake I plan to call on." She paused, then added lightly, "In fact, I believe you know them, Mr. Aborn—the Donnell family."

The man looked startled, then recovered himself. "Oh, yes. Fine family. Say hello to them for me, please."

Nancy promised that she would. Since Mr. Aborn made no move to accompany her, she said good-by and walked rapidly back to the spot where her convertible was parked.

As Nancy climbed into it, she cast a glance over her shoulder. There was no sign of Mr. Aborn. Had he gone into the shack? Was someone there? Had he been delivering packages to the person?

Nancy started the car's motor and backed out to the main road. As she drove along, her thoughts were entirely on Mr. Aborn. She had no doubt but that the man had been lying about Laura's behavior.

"I must find out more about that man," Nancy decided.

Reaching the highway, she stopped at a service station, had the gas tank of her car filled, and asked directions to the Donnell home. The attendant told her how to reach the place, and a short while later Nancy drew up before a lovely redwood house located well off the road.

She got out and rang the front doorbell. There was no answer. Nancy walked around to the back of the house. A gardener was there, trimming the flower beds.

"Howdy, miss!" the elderly man hailed her. "Looking for the Donnells?"

"Yes. Are they away?" Nancy inquired.

"Yep. They're visiting relatives in Crescent Gardens 'til tonight. Any message?"

Nancy said no, that she would call again, and thanked the man. As she drove away Nancy was disappointed that she had been unable to pick up any information regarding Mr. Aborn.

"I don't want to leave Melrose Lake until I have learned something to help Laura," she thought. "Mr. Aborn may trace her whereabouts to our home and force Laura to return with him before Dad gets back to town. I suppose he has a legal right to do it."

At last an idea came to Nancy. "I'll go to one of the hotels on the lake and engage a room. Then, after it gets dark, I'll do a little more investigating."

Fortunately, Nancy always carried an overnight case in her car trunk. It contained pajamas and robe, two changes of clothing, toilet articles, and, this time of year, a bathing suit.

Presently she saw a large white building ahead of her. Its green lawn sloped down to the

sandy beach. On the stone pillar at the side of the driveway was the sign: Beach *Cliff* Hotel.

"I think I'll stop here," Nancy decided. She parked her car and entered the pleasant lobby. In a few minutes she had registered and been taken to a comfortable room overlooking the lake.

"I'll telephone home," Nancy said to herself, "and tell Hannah where I am."

As Nancy placed the call, a chilling thought suddenly popped into her mind. Perhaps the detective whom Aborn had engaged had already traced the runaway girl, and knew Nancy had not told all she knew about Laura. If so, Nancy might find that her guest had already been whisked away from the Drew home!

CHAPTER XI

Trapped!

WHEN Hannah Gruen answered the telephone at the Drew residence, Nancy at once asked, "Is Laura all right?"

"Why, of course," Hannah answered in surprise. "She's upstairs setting her hair for the party this afternoon."

"Well, tell her to be very careful," Nancy urged. "Mr. Aborn has a detective looking for her!"

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Gruen. "And when will you be home, Nancy?"

The young detective explained where she was and that she planned to stay at Melrose Lake and do more sleuthing.

"I think I may be on the trail of something big."

"I don't like the idea of you prowling around the Aborns' home in the dead of night," the housekeeper objected.

"I'll be careful," Nancy promised. "I may even get home tonight."

"Well, all right," Hannah consented reluctantly. "By the way, Nancy, I had a repairman fix the window in Mr. Drew's study this morning, and also requested the police to keep a lookout for anything suspicious going on in this neighborhood."

"Wonderful!" Nancy said, feeling relieved. "Any more news?"

"Everything's quiet here," Hannah reported. "And Laura seems happy."

Laura came to speak to Nancy and was alarmed when she heard that a detective was looking for her. "But I won't go back to those awful Aborns! They can't make me! If they try it, I'll—I'll run right to the police!"

"That's a good idea," said Nancy. "By the way, I'd like to do some sleuthing at the Aborn house. I may want to get inside without ringing the bell." The young sleuth chuckled. "Since it's now your house too, may I have permission to go in and look around?"

"You certainly may," said Laura with a giggle. "If no doors are unlocked, try my bedroom window. I left it open a crack and there's a sturdy rose trellis right alongside it."

"Terrific!" said Nancy elatedly.

After she completed the call, Nancy went to the hotel coffee shop for a hearty lunch. Since it was now almost one thirty, the room was empty.

After eating, Nancy put on her bathing suit and wandered down to the beach. A boy in attendance gave her a towel and Nancy stretched out on the sand, unaware of the steadfast glance of a couple hidden behind a large green-and-white striped umbrella not far away. They nodded to each other, then when Nancy was not looking, they quickly left the beach.

"Guess we're safe," the woman muttered. "She's here to stay and have a good time."

As the strong rays of the sun beat down on the unsuspecting girl, she rehearsed her plan for the evening. When it was dark she would visit both Jacob Aborn's home and also the shack in the woods, if time permitted.

"I'll miss Dad's call tonight," Nancy reflected.

Standing up half an hour later, Nancy put on her bathing cap and walked to the water. She stuck her toe in. The lake water felt icy cold, and Nancy noticed that there were more people on the beach than in swimming. Nevertheless, she waded out to where it was deep enough to make a surface dive and plunged in. Once she was wet, the water was invigorating.

After swimming for a while, Nancy came back to her beach towel and dried off. Then she returned to her room, showered, and slept for two hours, realizing that the rest would give her more endurance for the evening ahead.

Awakening at six o'clock, Nancy put on the simple black cotton dress from her suitcase and pumps. After brushing her hair until it snapped with electricity, she was ready for supper.

"What will it be this evening, miss?" asked the friendly waitress.

Nancy selected steak, a baked potato, and tossed salad, then sat back to enjoy the soft dinner music playing in the background. The orchestra was in an adjoining lounge.

Nearby diners regarded the lone girl with interest, for the prospect of the daring adventure had brought a becoming flush to her cheeks.

"If I'm wrong in suspecting Jacob Aborn of being dishonest," thought Nancy, "then I guess I'd better give up sleuthing!"

Upon leaving the dining room an hour later, she lingered on the porch for a few minutes, watching couples dance. As a red-haired young man began to walk toward Nancy with an invitation in his eyes for her to dance, she hastily went to her room.

Chuckling to herself, Nancy said aloud, "Romance and detective work won't mix tonight!" Then she changed to walking shoes, sweater, and skirt.

The moment it became dark enough for her purpose, Nancy left the hotel in her car. As she drew near the Aborns' lane a short while later, she turned the convertible off the road and ran it into a clump of bushes where it would not be seen.

Switching off the engine and locking the doors, Nancy started down the lane leading to the house, holding her flashlight securely. She found the windows of the house dark.

"The Aborns are out, I guess," she told herself. "Well, that means I can do some looking around."

Circling the structure cautiously, Nancy noted that the second-floor wing, where the bedrooms apparently were located, was in the back. She found the trellis easily.

"I'll try the doors first," Nancy decided, and darted to the front. Gently turning the handle, she found the door locked.

An investigation of two other doors revealed that they, too, were securely fastened.

"I guess I'll have to climb after all," Nancy said to herself.

As quietly as possible, she climbed the trellis. It wobbled and creaked a little but did not give way. When Nancy reached the window ledge of Laura's bedroom, she found to her delight that the window raised easily. She crawled through and switched on her flashlight.

As Nancy tiptoed across the room, which was in disorder, she heard a noise. Halting, she listened. A car was approaching the house. Looking out the window she could barely make out the figures of a man and a woman who alighted. Who were they and what should Nancy do?

"I'll stay right here," she determined.

As Nancy waited tensely she realized someone was walking up the stairs. Quickly Nancy closed the window without a sound. As she looked around for a hiding place she saw a closet, and darted inside it, switching off her flashlight. Crouched in a far corner behind some of Laura's dresses, Nancy scarcely dared to breathe.

The door to the room was opened a moment later and the boudoir lamps switched on. Cautiously Nancy peered out through the keyhole in the closet door. She saw Jacob Aborn!

The man went directly to Laura's dressing table. Apparently he had not heard Nancy, for he did not glance toward the closet.

Ruthlessly he jerked out drawers from the dressing table and emptied their contents upon the bed. As he surveyed the assortment of tiny bottles, boxes, and other paraphernalia, Laura's guardian gave a disgusted grunt.

"Last place to look!" he said, as if addressing someone out in the hall, probably his wife. "Guess Laura really took the jewels with her. Well, I'll soon have them back!"

Nancy's heart leaped. There was no longer any doubt in her mind as to the character of this man. She was now certain that his sole interest in Laura was to get possession of her property! Only the girl's opportune escape from the house had prevented him from seizing the valuable jewelry collection!

"Laura's mother couldn't have known his true character, or she wouldn't have entrusted her daughter to Aborn's care," Nancy pondered.

Her thoughts came to an abrupt end as the man moved toward the closet. Fearfully, Nancy ducked down behind Laura's dresses again and fervently hoped that she would not be discovered.

Suddenly, as Nancy's legs began to grow cramped, the closet door was jerked violently open. Jacob Aborn looked in!

CHAPTER XII

A Black Abyss

As JACOB ABORN stared into the closet where Nancy was hiding, the girl detective wished wildly that she were invisible. There was no telling what harm the man might inflict if he saw her!

"He has such a violent temper," Nancy realized.

But Aborn's glance did not stray to the dress section. Instead, he reached up for two large suitcases which were on a shelf above the clothes. He set them on the floor outside and shut the closet door.

Beads of perspiration trickled down Nancy's neck as she relaxed. Presently she heard the man leave the room and shut the hall door with a loud bang.

Nancy waited a moment, then left her hiding place. "I suppose I'd better leave while I can," she advised herself.

But running away from a chance to pick up a clue was not in Nancy's nature. As she heard Laura's guardian descending the stairs to the first floor, she became aware of a woman's voice somewhere below. Nancy decided, "I'll stay and see what's going on."

Before leaving Laura's bedroom she gave it a final searching look and shook her head, puzzled. The room was one which Nancy would be happy to call her own. The feminine furnishings and good colonial pieces showed evidence of discerning taste. They did not fit the Aborns' character. Perhaps an interior decorator had planned it!

"One could believe from this room that the Aborns really wanted Laura," Nancy pondered.

It just did not make sense. Many criminals, Nancy knew, laid the groundwork to lull any suspicion on the part of their victim, then cornered him. But Laura had not even been settled in her new home when the Aborns had begun to persecute her.

Soundlessly Nancy opened the bedroom door, and keeping her flashlight low to the floor, tiptoed along the carpeted hall. Step by step, she edged down the stairway to the floor below. Here there was no sign of activity but Nancy saw a light shining through louvered doors to her left.

"That's probably the kitchen. The Aborns are in there," she thought.

A moment later the woman said, "Here's the combination. I'll pack this stuff while you open the safe."

Quickly Nancy stole into the living room and hastily ducked out of sight behind a large sofa. She was just in time. One of the louvered doors opened and Laura's guardian came into the living room carrying a suitcase. He flicked on a table lamp.

Near it hung the small oil painting of a ship. Aborn lifted it from the wall and set the picture against a chair.

Nancy's eyes widened as she saw that the painting had concealed a wall safe. Aborn deftly twirled the dial to the left, then several notches to the right, and back to the left again. He swung the safe door open.

With a grunt of satisfaction, the man removed several packages of bank notes and some papers which looked like stock certificates. Mr. Aborn chortled and called to his wife:

"When we get the rest of these cashed, you and I will be set for life—thanks to Laura and a few others."

Nancy, startled, almost gave herself away. So Laura did have a sizable inheritance other than the jewelry! But how had the securities reached the safe? Had Aborn brought them here or was he stealing them from someone else? Nancy felt more confused by the moment.

As her thoughts raced, Aborn replaced the loose papers in the safe and closed it. Then he put the money and securities into the suitcase. Giving a tired yawn, he switched off the lamp and left the room.

"Guess I'll turn in," he called to his wife. "Got to be up early tomorrow and get Fred. You

ready?"

"Yes."

Marian Aborn came from the kitchen carrying the other bag. Together the couple ascended the stairs. Nancy heard a bedroom door above close.

"Now I must get the police," the girl detective thought.

She paused for several seconds, after coming from behind the couch, to stretch her cramped limbs. "I'd better go out the front door," she decided. "The bedrooms don't overlook that."

Noiselessly Nancy slipped outside and started for her hidden car. Then a temptation came to her. "Why don't I investigate that shack in the woods first? I may have an even bigger story to tell the police! I'll do it!"

Taking a deep breath of air, Nancy hurried toward the path leading to the dilapidated building. Had she been right about having heard someone inside? Was he a friend or an enemy of Aborn's? Were the packages being carried there and what did they contain? Loot?

"Maybe just food," Nancy concluded. "But being taken to whom?"

Beaming her flashlight on the ground, the young detective soon picked up the trail she had taken earlier in the day. It was quiet and eerie as she stumbled along the uneven ground. Nancy became apprehensive once or twice as she heard scuffling noises of forest creatures in the underbrush, but went on.

"I wish Dad were here now," she thought fervently.

Nancy reached the shack without mishap and paused in front of it. A sixth sense seemed to tell her there was someone inside who needed help. No person would stay in such a place unless forced to.

"This is no time for me to hesitate," she told herself.

As Nancy moved toward the rear of the tumble-down building, she glanced at her flashlight and was alarmed to see that it was beginning to grow dim.

"Just my luck when I need it the most!"

In an attempt to save the battery, Nancy switched off the light. As her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, she moved toward the window she had looked through earlier that day. Appraising it, the young sleuth realized that the window ledge was too high from the ground for her to climb through unassisted, even when standing on the box.

Undaunted, she began to examine the other windows. On the south side of the shack she found one which opened from the rickety porch. It was boarded up.

"This is my entry," Nancy determined.

She began searching the yard for something with which to pry off the boards, and finally found a stout stick. Nancy began wedging it between the boards with all her might.

The first board offered stubborn resistance. Then, with a groan and a squeak, it gave way. The remaining boards were removed with less difficulty.

To Nancy's joy, the window was unlocked! Pushing it up, she beamed her flashlight inside. The room beyond was bare and quiet as a tomb.

"Well, here comes Nancy Drew, housebreaker and spy!" Nancy thought with amused determination. "It's certain now no one lives here."

When she was halfway through the window the young sleuth hesitated without knowing just why. She glanced back over her shoulder. A queer sensation made Nancy quiver as she turned searching eyes toward the woods.

"How silly!" she scolded herself. "No one's there. It's just nerves."

Bravely Nancy swung herself through the window. Hastily she moved toward an adjoining room, noting that her flashlight was growing dimmer. Soon she would be left in total darkness! She must hurry!

Her light revealed a small room, also empty, its walls and floor dusty from long lack of any occupant's care. Nancy was disappointed to find nothing of interest.

"I'd better leave and drive to police headquarters," she thought.

Just then Nancy's flashlight revealed a trap door in the floor. Quickly she moved over toward it. But she had taken only a few steps when an unusual sound arrested her attention. Had she heard a board creak behind her, or was it a night sound from the woods?

After hesitating a second, Nancy again started for the trap door. As she reached down to grasp the ring in it, her body became tense.

This time there was no mistake. She had heard a peculiar sound which seemed to come from beneath the floor.

"It sounded like a groan!" Nancy decided. She felt cold all over.

Someone was imprisoned in the cellar! Who? And why?

As Nancy tugged at the ring, another idea came to her. This might be a trap laid for her!

"Oh, what should I do?" she thought, hesitating. There was still time to run away from danger.

But the fear that some person was in distress gave her the courage to open the trap door. As it swung upward, Nancy saw before her a flight of stone steps, leading down into complete darkness. A gust of damp, musty air struck her in the face and momentarily repulsed her.

Nancy glanced nervously at her flashlight. The battery could not last much longer. Already the light was so weak that she could barely see the steps in front of her. Did she dare investigate the cellar?

"It won't take long," she thought.

She descended the steps and came to a landing. The rest of the stairway went toward the left. Nancy peered anxiously into the black abyss below.

To her horror, she saw a man stretched out full length on a bench. His face was turned upward and Nancy caught a full glimpse of the countenance.

He was Jacob Aborn!

CHAPTER XIII

An Actor's Ruse

SPELLBOUND, Nancy stood like a stone image, gazing down into the face of Jacob Aborn. How had the man reached the bungalow ahead of her? What was he doing sleeping in the musty cellar of the old shack?

As these thoughts flashed through Nancy's mind, the beam of her flashlight flickered again. Then it went out, leaving her in total darkness,

Sheer panic took possession of the girl detective. Something very strange was going on! She must not be caught in a trap!

Turning, she gave a low cry and stumbled up the stairway and toward the window through which she had entered. Her flight was abruptly checked as she banged one foot on something metallic that moved ahead of her. In a second she smelled kerosene.

"A lantern!" she decided.

The thought of a light gave her hope. She felt around and discovered an old-time oil lantern,

Collecting her wits, she stopped and listened for any sounds of pursuit. There were none. The shack appeared as deserted and silent as before.

"I'm sure that was Jacob Aborn down in the cellar," Nancy thought in perplexity. "I didn't imagine it. But how did he get here so fast? After I left his house I didn't waste much time."

Suddenly an amazing thought came to Nancy. Was the man she had seen by chance a brother, even a twin, of Jacob Aborn? He might be honest and Jacob had found him in the way!

"I'm going to find out!" Nancy declared excitedly.

Eagerly she reached into the pocket of her dress, recalling that at dinner she had taken a pack of matches from the hotel dining table for her souvenir collection. Good! The pack was still there!

Striking a match she was pleased to discover that the lantern was half full of oil. Someone had used it recently, for the glass was clean. Nancy lighted the wick and a flame spurted up. Carrying the lantern, she returned to the trap door.

Suddenly, from below, Nancy heard a moan of pain. This was followed by a pitiful cry of "Help!"

"That settles it," the worried girl thought.

As she descended the steps, the lantern's flickering glow revealed that the cellar was dungeon-like, with solid stone walls and no windows.

From below came a pitiful cry of "Help!"

She held the light high above the figure on the bench. A man, deathly pale, was lying where she had first seen him.

But he was not Laura's guardian!

"There's certainly a startling resemblance, though," Nancy thought, her heart filled with pity for this unfortunate stranger.

Dropping to her knees, she felt his pulse. It was faint but regular.

"He's just unconscious," she told herself in relief.

At the same time, Nancy saw with horror a large chain around the man's waist. It was attached to the prisoner in such a way that it allowed him some freedom of motion and yet held him captive. Was Jacob Aborn responsible for this atrocity? Nancy wondered angrily.

"I must do something to revive this man," she decided, "and get him away from here."

Picking up the lantern, Nancy mounted the cellar steps two at a time. She headed for a small sink in one corner of the room above, where she had seen a pump.

After a search through the cupboard she at last found a battered tin cup. Quickly pumping water into it, she returned to the cellar.

Nancy wet her handkerchief and applied it gently to the prisoner's forehead. Then she sprinkled a little of the water on his face and chafed his wrists. The man stirred slightly and moaned.

As she gazed anxiously into his face, Nancy wondered how she could have mistaken him for Jacob Aborn. Although the two men were of the same age, and had similar facial characteristics, the prisoner was gaunt and thin. His features, contrary to Mr. Aborn's, were gentle and relaxed.

Now Nancy saw that the man was slowly regaining consciousness. As his eyes fluttered open he cried "Help!" feebly, then stared into Nancy's face, amazed.

"Help has come," Nancy said quietly.

The man attempted to raise himself to a sitting position with Nancy's aid. "Didn't—think—help —would—ever come," he murmured. Then he saw the cup in Nancy's hand and asked for water.

Nancy steadied the cup while he drank. Finally the man leaned against the wall. "First water I've had in twenty-four hours," he said more clearly.

The young sleuth was horrified. She introduced herself, then asked, "Who are you—and who did this terrible thing to you?"

A bitter expression passed over the prisoner's face. "I'm Jacob Aborn," he said. "A crook by the name of Stumpy Dowd took over my house, imprisoned me here, and somehow or other arranged for my new ward, Laura Pendleton, to come to my home earlier than she was expected. Yesterday he told me that he had the girl's inheritance in his possession—and showed bonds to prove it."

"You're Jacob Aborn!" Nancy repeated, as the prisoner, exhausted by these words, leaned against the wall.

Quickly Nancy's mind flashed back to everything that had happened since she had met Laura. The puzzling questions that had bothered her about the girl's guardian now became clear. Most of all, it was a relief to know that the person to whom Marie Pendleton had entrusted her daughter's care was not a criminal.

Equally important, Nancy realized that Stephen Dowd—alias Stumpy—used his talent as an actor and skill with make-up to fool other people, and then probably swindled them. The young sleuth wondered if there was a tie-in between Laura's inheritance and the Monroe National Bank thefts of stocks and bonds. She must find out from Jacob Aborn, but the police should be notified immediately, as well as her father.

Aloud Nancy said, "I want to hear the whole story of what has happened to you, Mr. Aborn, but first—"

Briefly, she told of having met the man who had impersonated him and of seeing Laura at Twin Lakes. Nancy was about to add that Laura was now at her home when Mr. Aborn said:

"If Stumpy caught you here once today we'd better get out right now!" He told Nancy that Dowd kept the key to the padlock on his chains on a hook near the stairway.

"This is a lucky break," said Nancy. She snatched the lantern from the floor and started toward the stairs.

"Please hurry," Mr. Aborn said faintly. "Stumpy Dowd is a dangerous criminal! He boasted to me that he and his accomplices have victimized several people besides Laura!"

Nancy anxiously moved the lantern up and down, illuminating the dingy walls. Just above her head to the left she finally saw the hook, with a key dangling from it.

"I have it!" she exclaimed triumphantly.

As Nancy hurried back to Mr. Aborn's side she speculated on how the Dowds had found out about Mr. Aborn, his wife, and Laura.

"I'll have you free in a minute, Mr. Aborn," Nancy said, as she stooped over the bench.

While she worked on the rusty lock, Nancy asked if he had known the Dowds previously.

"Yes," he replied. "Mrs. Dowd was hired by my wife as a maid to come when we arrived. Soon after I reached the house her husband came. He grew quite loud and abusive and when I objected he knocked me unconscious. When I came to, I was chained in this cellar."

"How dreadful!" Nancy exclaimed. "But where is your wife?" she asked.

"She had to go to Florida unexpectedly. Her mother, who lives there, had an emergency operation. Marian went down to be with her and I moved into our new home." Mr. Aborn sighed. "Of course I haven't heard a word from her since I've been tied up here!"

“You’ll be able to find out about her now,” Nancy assured him. “Do you know how many people are working with Stumpy Dowd?”

“One or two others besides his wife, I believe. Stumpy Dowd is secretive about some things, although he boasted a lot. I did hear him mention the name Fred, but I don’t know who he is.”

When the padlock finally snapped open Nancy’s spirits soared. Now the suitcase of securities that Stumpy Dowd had packed could be retrieved. The criminals could be apprehended and her father’s case perhaps solved!

Meanwhile, neither Nancy nor Mr. Aborn had noticed a dark figure creeping slowly down the steps. Near and nearer the man came, a stout cane gripped tightly in his right hand.

“That’s wonderful, Nancy!” Mr. Aborn exclaimed. “Now if I just knew where Laura is.” As he spoke Mr. Aborn glanced up. A look of horror froze his face.

“Look out, Nancy!” he shouted.

CHAPTER XIV

A Desperate Situation

THE WARNING came too late. Before Nancy could turn, the end of the cane crashed down on her head. With a low moan of pain, she sagged to the floor and lay still.

How long she remained unconscious, the young sleuth did not know.When at last she opened her eyes Nancy found herself stretched out on the cold floor of the cellar. Bewildered, it was a full minute before she could account for the splitting pain in her head.

Then, with a shudder, the young sleuth remembered what had happened. She had been struck down from behind. Who was her assailant?

Nancy became aware that someone was standing over her, but objects whirled before her eyes and she could not distinguish the face. Then, gradually, her vision cleared. She saw Stumpy Dowd gazing down upon her, a satisfied leer on his face.

"Well, Miss Drew," he said mockingly, "we meet again. You've gotten in my way once too often!"

As Nancy started to speak, Dowd reached down. Catching Nancy by an arm, he jerked her roughly to her feet. Nancy was so weak that she nearly fell over.

Nevertheless, with a show of spirit, she said, "You'll regret this, I promise you!"

"Let the girl go," Jacob Aborn pleaded from the other side of the room. "Do anything you like to me, but set her free." Nancy saw that he was again padlocked.

Stumpy Dowd glared at his other prisoner. "It's quite impossible for me to release either of you," he said calmly. "You see, you both know too much."

Nancy was aware that resistance would be useless. Right now she did not have the strength to make a break for the stairs. But as the criminal began to unwind a long rope, Nancy realized that unless she thought of something the situation would be desperate. There would be no way to escape!

As Stumpy began to bind Nancy's feet together he said sarcastically, "Mr. Aborn will enjoy having company. And you two have so much to talk about."

An idea suddenly came to Nancy. She remembered that a detective who had called on her father a few months before had told her how it was possible to hold one's hands while being bound so as to slip the bonds later. He had given a demonstration.

"If I can only remember the correct position," Nancy prayed fervently.

When Dowd began to bind Nancy's wrists she tried to follow the detective's instructions. As the ropes cut into her flesh it seemed to Nancy that she must have made a mistake. Certainly there was little space between her wrists and the bonds.

"And now, just to make sure you won't get away—" Stumpy muttered with a sneer.

He took the end of the rope and ran it through a ring in the wall, knotting the rope fast.

"I guess that will hold you for a while and teach you not to meddle in affairs that are none of your business!" the man added.

Nancy Drew had never been so angry in her life, but she realized that any argument she might give would only provoke the man to further torture. So she set her jaw grimly and kept still.

"You'll pay for this, Dowd!" Jacob Aborn spoke up in a quavering voice. "When I get free —"

"When you get free!" Stumpy Dowd taunted. "That's a laugh. Why, you fool, how do you propose to get help? If it hadn't been for this meddlesome Drew girl only the rats would have known you were here!"

Nancy could not help but remark quietly, "The police will catch you in the end."

"I doubt it," Dowd said with confidence. "I've covered my trail thoroughly. I've made plans to leave the country and I'd like to see the police or anyone else catch me!" He turned to Laura's guardian. "First, of course, we'll have to get the jewels away from Laura."

"How do you propose to do that," Nancy asked quickly, "when you don't know where she is?"

Stumpy Dowd laughed. "That's what you think. Laura is at your home in River Heights, Nancy Drewl"

As Nancy blinked, a look of horror came into Mr. Aborn's eyes. Nancy knew he was wondering why she had not mentioned Laura's being at her home. Also, he realized that his last hope of keeping Laura's whereabouts unknown was gone.

Nancy, too, was worried. What did Stumpy plan to do? Right now, he looked pleased at his prisoners' reactions.

"My wife overheard Laura placing a call to Nancy Drew in River Heights yesterday morning. When Laura ran away, we had a hunch she would go there. I asked my detective to find out."

Dowd said the sleuth had seen Laura leaving the house that afternoon with a young man. "I presume she left her jewels behind," he added. "But we'll get them before we leave this area!"

"Don't try anything foolish," Nancy warned.

"All my plans are well made," Dowd said coolly. "Too bad you aren't more cautious, Miss Drew."

He said that his wife had felt a draft in the house and gone downstairs to find the front door part way open. Then she had seen a girl heading into the woods and had awakened him. Dowd had figured out that it might be Nancy.

"That's the end of my story," he said, "except to tell you, Aborn, I sold your blue sedan this morning. The money helped pay for my new foreign car."

Jacob Aborn was so furious he almost choked. "You robber! You kidnaper!" he cried out.

"Tut, tut, none of that!" Dowd said. "You'll get your blood pressure up."

"Laura's not in your clutches, and she won't get there!" Aborn stormed. "And I can support her without any inheritance!"

Dowd shrugged. "It won't do any good to threaten me. You're my prisoner and don't forget it! After the jewels are mine—"

Nancy felt as if she would choke with rage. Mr. Aborn closed his eyes and seemed to have fainted.

Meanwhile, Stumpy Dowd had replaced the key on the wall—the hook supporting it, Nancy saw, was far out of the two prisoners' reach.

"You can think of this in the days ahead," the crook taunted. "And now—good-by!"

Turning, he ambled up the steps. Nancy heard mocking laughter as the trap door was slammed shut. Soon a deathlike quiet fell on the shack.

"Mr. Aborn!" Nancy called.

There was no answer. Nancy's heart beat wildly. Was the man only in a faint or had something worse happened to him?

Holding her breath, she strained her ears to see if she could detect any sign of life. A few seconds later Nancy caught faint sounds of inhaling and exhaling.

"Thank goodness," she thought.

Presently the man stirred, and regaining consciousness, looked about. Seeing Nancy, he exclaimed, "Now I remember! We were so near freedom."

"Yes, we were, Mr. Aborn. And we may get out of here yet. I'm trying to slip this rope off my wrists. In the meantime, I want to tell you why I didn't mention that Laura is at my home. I was about to do so when you urged that we leave the shack as fast as possible."

"I see and I forgive you," said Mr. Aborn. "Never having met you, Dowd's announcement gave me a momentary feeling of distrust in you. But that's gone now."

"Then would you mind telling me about Laura's mother and the estate she left?" Nancy requested, as she worked to free her hands.

"I'll be glad to. Mrs. Pendleton appointed the Monroe National Bank executor of her estate and me as Laura's guardian. During Mrs. Pendleton's long illness she had all her securities taken from her private safe-deposit box and put in care of the bank. They were turned over to the custodian department and kept in the bank's personal vault."

"Then how could Stumpy Dowd get them?" Nancy asked.

"That's the mystery. He didn't say."

Nancy was convinced now that a good portion of Laura's inheritance must be among the securities stolen from the bank. She asked whether Mrs. Pendleton had left a large estate.

Mr. Aborn nodded. "Laura is a very wealthy young woman," he said, then went on to

explain that at the time of Mrs. Pendleton's death, the Aborns were abroad. Upon their arrival in New York, Mrs. Aborn had received word of her mother's illness. It was then that Laura had been asked to postpone coming to Melrose Lake until his wife's return.

"Laura was staying on at her boarding school with the headmistress until our trip to Melrose."

"She never received your letter," Nancy told him. "The Dowds must have intercepted it. Soon they told her to come."

Just then Nancy thought she had found the trick to freeing her hands, but a moment later she sighed in discouragement. The rope still bound her wrists.

"At least we have a light," she said. Fortunately, Stumpy Dowd had forgotten the lantern.

"Yes, but the oil is burning low," Mr. Aborn remarked quietly. "When it's gone we'll be in the dark—as I have been for the past two weeks."

Nancy shuddered. "Did Stumpy bring you food in little packages?"

"Yes, when he thought of it. He kept me alive just to pump me for information, and threatened to harm Laura if I didn't tell him what he wanted to know."

Suddenly Nancy felt the rope which chafed her wrists slacken. At the same time the light went out. The cellar was plunged into darkness.

CHAPTER XV

Plans for Rescue

BACK in River Heights, meanwhile, Hannah Gruen had spent a restless and worried evening, expecting to hear Nancy's convertible pull into the driveway at any moment. Moreover, Mr. Drew had failed to call at the appointed hour and Hannah had no knowledge of how to contact the lawyer.

At ten thirty, when the front doorbell rang, the housekeeper limped hurriedly to answer it. Instantly she felt a sense of keen disappointment.

"Oh, hello, Laura," she said, and turned to greet Don Cameron. "Did you have a good time at the barbecue?"

"It was wonderful!" Laura exclaimed happily, as she and Don entered the house.

"Certainly was fun," Don agreed. "Too bad Nancy wasn't with us. Where is she, Mrs. Gruen?"

At these words tears welled up in Hannah's eyes. She told of not hearing from either Nancy or Mr. Drew that evening. "I'm so upset," she said. "What will we do? Call the police?"

"Probably Nancy decided to stay overnight at the Beach Cliff Hotel," Laura said at once. "Have you called there to find out?"

"No, because Nancy always calls when she changes her plans."

Don, greatly concerned, went at once to the telephone. Impatiently the young man waited for a response to his ring.

The hotel telephone operator answered. When Don asked for Nancy Drew, the girl said, "Just a moment." It was nearly five minutes before she told him:

"We are unable to reach your party. Miss Drew is not in the hotel."

"Then she didn't check out earlier this evening?" Don inquired.

"No. Miss Drew is still registered."

Don Cameron hung up, a drawn expression on his face. He told the others what he had learned.

"Oh, I just know something has happened to Nancy!" Laura cried, her lower lip quivering with nervousness. "And it's all my fault."

Hannah took the girl into her arms. "You must not feel this way," she said gently. "Nancy is trying to help you because she wants to."

Don spoke up, "I don't know whether we should notify the police or drive to Melrose Lake ourselves."

As the three hesitated, they heard an automobile stop in front of the house. Then a door slammed. Don looked out the window.

"It's a man," he said. "He's coming to the door."

Don opened the door to Carson Drew, who came inside immediately. He greeted Hannah and Don. Then, after being introduced to Laura Pendleton and bidding her welcome to his home, the lawyer asked:

"Where's Nancy? Upstairs?"

When told that his daughter had not returned from her investigation at Melrose Lake, the lawyer was gravely concerned.

"I don't like the sound of this at all," he said. "I had no idea that Nancy was planning to sleuth in Mr. Aborn's home at night."

"She mentioned something about wanting to pay another visit to a mysterious shack in the woods, Mr. Drew," Hannah volunteered. "But I don't know where it's located."

Carson Drew's anxiety deepened. "It would be just like Nancy to follow up a good clue," he said, "particularly if she thinks there is something odd about the shack. She never gives up until she figures out the solution to whatever the problem is."

Despite his worry, Nancy's father uttered these words proudly. He had often admired the

initiative his daughter displayed when she was trying to unravel a mystery.

"I think you're on the right track, Mr. Drew," Don Cameron said thoughtfully. "Since Nancy hasn't returned to the hotel, there are three possibilities—she's had car trouble, something has happened to her in the woods—"

"Or the Aborns have discovered Nancy prowling about their house," Laura put in fearfully. "And if that is the case, there's no telling what they may do to her!"

The girl quickly mentioned a few of the things which had happened in her brief stay at the Aborns.

"I'll leave for Melrose Lake immediately," Mr. Drew announced. "If I don't find Nancy in a very short time, I'm going to notify the police that she's missing!"

The others begged Mr. Drew to let them accompany him. The lawyer thought it best for Hannah to remain at home in case Nancy should call.

"But I'll be glad to have you accompany me, Laura and Don," he added.

Don hurried to the telephone to notify his parents of the plan, while Laura went for a coat. Then they went outside and got into Mr. Drew's car.

"Be sure to call me as soon as you've found out something!" Hannah called.

"Don't worry, we will!"

Nancy's father was a skillful driver and right now he was intent upon reaching the lake as soon as possible. He could barely restrain himself from breaking the speed limits.

"This is one time I wish I had a helicopter," he told the two young people.

"It wouldn't do you much good at Melrose Lake, Mr. Drew," said Laura. "It's a pretty thickly wooded area. I doubt that you'd find a landing strip."

Don realized that this remark, although unintentional, heightened Carson Drew's worry about Nancy being lost in the woods. He changed the subject quickly.

"I thought you weren't due home until Sunday, sir," Don said.

"That's right," the lawyer replied, his eyes intent on the highway ahead. "In Cincinnati late this afternoon I had a call from Chief McGinnis of the River Heights police. He thought it was imperative for me to return home immediately."

Mr. Drew proceeded to tell Don and Laura the complete story of the embezzlement case.

Laura looked worried. "The Monroe National Bank had my mother's securities!" she exclaimed. "You don't suppose—"

"Maybe," Don put in, "Nancy learned something in connection with this at the Aborn house and is staying to get more information."

"Oh, she shouldn't have done it!" Laura cried out fearfully.

"Now there may not be anything to your theory," Mr. Drew remarked. "Don't borrow trouble."

Don patted Laura's shoulder. "Sure. We have enough worries as it is. Mr. Drew, you were telling us why you came back early."

"Yes. Although I'm making a private investigation for Mr. Seward, the bank president, Chief McGinnis has been helping me on an unofficial basis. We're old friends, you see.

"When Nancy told me that two of the suspects —the Dowds—were in the acting profession and had been out of town recently, I had a hunch they might tie in with the case. I asked the chief to check on any past records the couple might have, and call me in Cincinnati."

At this point Carson Drew explained that Chief McGinnis had learned that the Dowds both had records for theft and embezzlement. Each had served prison terms. Using various aliases, they had either acted or worked in theaters in several states and among other crimes had robbed the ticket offices.

"When the chief told me this," said Carson Drew, "I asked him to take the list of missing securities to various brokerage offices in the River Heights area. He did this and found that during the past few days all of them had been sold by a woman."

"The same woman?" Don asked.

"Apparently not," Mr. Drew replied. "At least when Chief McGinnis asked for the woman's description it was different every time."

"How odd!" Laura exclaimed. "Could it have been Mrs. Dowd? Since she's an actress she must be good at disguise."

"You may be right," Mr. Drew acknowledged. "Anyway, the chief sent two officers to their house to pick up the Dowds for questioning."

"Did they find them?" Don asked eagerly.

The lawyer shook his head. "When the police got to the house they learned that the actor

and actress had had a man caller earlier in the day and that the three had left together. Mr. Dowd said they would not be back."

"How discouraging for you"—Laura sighed in sympathy—"but I'm sure you'll find them."

"There's a state alarm out for the couple," Mr. Drew said. "They shouldn't be able to get very far."

"What do the Dowds look like?" Laura asked.

In reply, the lawyer took two photographs from his breast pocket and handed them to her.

Laura held the pictures toward the light on the dashboard. She shook her head in disbelief. "These are the Dowds?" she repeated.

"Yes, why? Have you seen them before?"

Laura said in a tense voice, "I know them as Mr. and Mrs. Aborn. Oh, Mr. Drew, if they've caught Nancy, she's in real danger!"

CHAPTER XVI

A Speedy Getaway

UNAWARE that help was coming, Nancy worked feverishly to slip her hands out of the ropes in the dark cellar of the shack.

"How are you doing?" Jacob Aborn asked her.

"The bonds are becoming looser," Nancy replied.

Suddenly she recalled Hannah's promise to send the police to the Aborns' home if she had not returned at a reasonable hour. When she told the imprisoned man about this, it seemed to give him courage.

However, to herself Nancy said, "By that time those criminals will have escaped. They may even prevent Hannah from carrying out her plan! And both Laura and Hannah may be harmed!"

As if to offset this alarming possibility, the ropes around Nancy's hands suddenly pulled free.

"I did it!" she exclaimed, and Mr. Aborn sprang from his bench, crying, "We'll be able to escape!"

Nancy did not respond, for she was working grimly at the ropes which bound her feet. "If I could only see!" she muttered.

Then she remembered the packet of matches in her skirt pocket. She took it out and lighted a match, which she stuck in a crack in the wall. As the light burned she worked to untie the knots that bound her ankles. Several more matches were used before she was free.

"Miss Drew, you're the most ingenious girl I've ever met!" Mr. Aborn said admiringly. "I wish I could think that fast. It just occurred to me that there's a can of kerosene under the stairs. You might fill the lantern."

Nancy found the can and in a few seconds the place was aglow with light.

"Now I'll open the padlock again," Nancy told Mr. Aborn.

After getting the key she hurried to the side of Laura's guardian. A minute later the chains fell to the floor with a loud thud.

"At last!" Jacob Aborn cried in relief.

"Our next step," said Nancy, "is to get out of here as fast as we can and then try to alert the police."

"It's my bet," her companion said, "that Dowd has already skipped town."

Nancy was inclined to agree, but since the swindler had not expected his two prisoners to escape, he might still be at the Aborn house with his wife.

"We'll head for my car," Nancy said, "and decide what we'll do when we reach it."

Jacob Aborn moved forward several steps, then his knees began to tremble. "My legs will be all right after I've used them for a few minutes," he apologized.

But try as he would, the man was unable to climb the stairway unassisted. Nancy reached out a strong arm to help him. At last they reached the top of the stairway.

The young sleuth led the way to the door, unbolted it, and the two stepped outside.

"What a relief!" Jacob Aborn gasped, filling his lungs with pure air.

In the east, the moon had risen over the woods and the sky was peppered with stars. The route among the trees would be easy to find in the clear night. Yet Nancy glanced uneasily at her companion, wondering if he would be able to walk to the car.

As if reading her thoughts, Aborn said, "I'm fine now. Let's go!"

Nancy offered her arm again, and at a slow pace they walked across the clearing and entered the woods. They had gone but a short way when Mr. Aborn sank down on a log, breathing heavily.

"You go on without me, Nancy," he said in a voice shaky with fatigue. "I can't do it."

"Just rest here for a moment," Nancy said encouragingly, unwilling to leave the man.

Shortly, Mr. Aborn felt he could continue. Leaning heavily on Nancy, he moved forward, refusing to pause again even for a brief rest.

"You're a very kind girl to help me," he said hoarsely.

Nancy replied modestly, "I'm so glad I found you. Think of what it means to Laura to have her real guardian found! I know she will be happy living with you and your wife."

At the mention of his wife's name Mr. Aborn said he was grateful that she had gone away before the Dowds invaded their home. "She might have been made a prisoner too!" he declared.

Presently, with a feeling of relief, Nancy caught sight of her convertible standing among the bushes where she had left it. After she had helped Mr. Aborn into the front seat, Nancy took her place behind the steering wheel.

"Now we'll drive to the nearest police station," she announced. "You direct me."

She inserted the key and tried the starter. To Nancy's surprise, the motor did not turn over.

"That's funny," she said, and tried again. Nothing happened. Next, Nancy glanced at the fuel gauge. It registered half full.

"I wonder if your battery's dead," Mr. Aborn said in a faint voice.

"I think not," Nancy replied, as she reached into the glove compartment and took out an extra flashlight she kept there for emergencies.

She got out of the car, lifted the hood, and flashed her light inside. She had taken a course in automobile mechanics and knew the possible sources of trouble.

"I see what the trouble is," Nancy called. "The distributor has been uncapped and the rotor's missing! This is sabotage!" Without this necessary part the car could not start. "I'm sure that Mr. Dowd is the saboteur," she added angrily.

Mr. Aborn sighed resignedly. "Stumpy Dowd leaves no stones unturned," he said in a tired voice. "Just in case we might escape he wanted to make certain we'd have no transportation. I'm afraid, Nancy, that we'll have to go to the main highway for help."

As Mr. Aborn spoke, Nancy heard a car motor not far away. Eagerly she looked to right and left but saw no approaching headlights.

"Quick! Duck down!" Mr. Aborn whispered, and Nancy crouched in the bushes alongside her car.

A dark foreign sports car emerged from the Eagle Rock lane, then made a left-hand turn in the direction of Twin Lakes!

"It's the Dowds making a getaway!" Mr. Aborn said. "We're too late!"

Nancy was alarmed by this turn of events. She wondered why Stumpy Dowd was not heading toward River Heights. Had he given up the idea of going to the Drews' residence and forcing Laura Pendleton to give him the jewels? Or was he taking an alternative route there?

"Oh dear! I wish there were a telephone nearby!" Nancy moaned. She told Mr. Aborn that his had been disconnected.

Jacob Aborn spoke up. "Nancy, I'm sure that Dowd and his wife have left my house for good. I think the best plan is for us to go there."

"Yes," Nancy agreed. "After you're safely inside I'll go for help."

"I can't let you do that," Jacob Aborn protested. "Few cars come along this road at night. You'll have an extremely long walk before you reach the main highway."

Silently Nancy agreed, but she also noted that the man's strength was almost spent. She helped him from the car, and the two slowly approached the lane that led to Mr. Aborn's house.

"Oh, if I could only get my hands on that scoundrel!" the man muttered.

The thought gave him new strength, and he moved forward again. Cautiously the two crept toward the house, approaching it from the rear.

"We'd better make certain that no one's here," Nancy whispered.

As they drew near the back door she saw that it stood ajar, as though someone had left hurriedly without taking time to shut it.

With Jacob Aborn close behind her, Nancy stepped cautiously into the kitchen. There was profound silence. The place appeared deserted.

Crossing the room on tiptoe, Nancy and Mr. Aborn walked toward the living room. He clicked on a light. Everything was in disorder. A chair had been overturned and papers were scattered about.

"The Dowds certainly made a thorough search," Nancy remarked.

Just then Mr. Aborn's eyes fell upon the wall safe which stood open. With a cry of alarm he

tottered across the room to look inside. Everything had been taken out.

Mr. Aborn groaned. He told Nancy that a sizable sum of his own money had been in the safe, along with shares of negotiable stock. Stumpy Dowd had forced him to tell the safe's combination on threat of harming Laura.

Mr. Aborn, white as starch, sank into a nearby chair and buried his head in his hands. "Nearly all my securities were in there," he said. One quick glance at him told Nancy that the man was on the verge of a complete collapse. She could not leave him alone, yet how could she get help without doing so?

A second later she and Mr. Aborn were startled to hear a car driving up the lane. Were the Dowds returning? Had the couple merely gone out for a while, or had they forgotten something in their hasty flight?

Nancy's next thought was far worse than either of these. Had Stumpy Dowd somehow learned that his two prisoners had escaped?

CHAPTER XVII

Two-way Detecting

As THE automobile pulled to a halt, Mr. Aborn slumped to the floor in a faint. Evidently he had shared Nancy's thought that the Dowds were returning, and would force their way in. The terrifying thought that he might become a prisoner again had been too much for the exhausted man.

"Oh!" Nancy cried out.

From the window Nancy saw four people hurriedly alighting from the car. A moment later the bell rang and a woman's voice cried, "Mr. Aborn —Mr. Aborn—please let us in. It's the Donnells!"

Nancy hurried to the front door and flung it open. "Cathyl Jim!" she cried out. "Oh, you don't know how glad I am to see you!"

The two young people introduced Nancy to their parents, a good-looking couple in their forties. Then they stepped inside.

"What are you doing here, Nancy?" Jim Donnell asked, puzzled at the girl's disheveled appearance. "What's going on?"

Nancy replied by saying Mr. Aborn was ill, and there was no time for further explanation right now. She hastily led the family into the living room. When they saw their unconscious friend on the floor, Mrs. Donnell rushed forward with an excited cry.

"How dreadful!" she exclaimed.

As she knelt down, the kindly woman said she was a registered nurse. After a brief examination of the patient she reported that Mr. Aborn appeared to be suffering from malnutrition and shock.

While Jim and his father lifted him onto the couch, Nancy told what had happened to him. The Donnells were stunned.

Before they could discuss it, however, Nancy turned to Jim. "Two phone calls must be made right away," she said. "Would you be able to take care of them for me?"

"Glad to," the boy said. "I suppose you want me to notify the police to pick up Stumpy Dowd—"

"Yes," Nancy said tersely, and described the black foreign car.

She next asked Jim to call Chief McGinnis at River Heights and tell him to have extra men patrol the Drew home. "Find out if Mrs. Gruen and Laura are all right," she requested, "and see if our housekeeper knows where to get in touch with Dad."

Jim said he would do all of these things. As soon as he returned, he would try to fix Nancy's car.

After Jim left, Nancy turned to the others. Mr. Aborn had regained consciousness and said he felt better and able to talk.

"Lillian," he said, giving Mrs. Donnell a wan smile, "the angels must have sent you. How did you know we were in trouble here?"

"We didn't for sure," Mr. Donnell replied gravely, "until tonight—it's a long story."

The gray-haired man said that he and his wife had been amazed to hear on Tuesday from their children that Marian Aborn had returned from Florida and that she and Jacob had met Laura Pendleton at Twin Lakes.

"We were sure you would have told us of your change of plans, if this were true, Jacob," he said to his old friend. "Anyway, we came over here yesterday morning to say hello and meet Laura. No one answered the bell."

"We concluded," said Mrs. Donnell, "that Nancy Drew had been mistaken in thinking that you were coming back here—anyway, we remembered you saying that due to the illness of Marian's mother you would not be able to come here with Laura until after your wife's return."

"That's right," said Mr. Aborn. He explained to Nancy that first there had been legal technicalities regarding his appointment as the orphan's guardian, since he had been living in another state. That was why his ward had remained at her boarding school.

Mrs. Donnell went on to say that this evening they had received a telephone call from Mrs. Aborn who was still in Florida. "Marian had tried several times to get you and was upset to learn that the phone here was disconnected. She called us to see why."

"My wite hadn't heard from me in over two weeks," Mr. Aborn stated.

Mrs. Donnell said, "But Marian thought she had. Mrs. Aborn sent telegrams here and replies came to her in Florida."

Mr. Donnell said that when the family heard that Marian Aborn was indeed in Florida, they were fearful something was terribly wrong.

"We told Marian what we knew, suggested she come home immediately, and said we would come over here right away to see what we could uncover."

"Thank goodness you did," Nancy sighed, and Mr. Aborn gave his friends a grateful smile. Then he asked, "How is Marian's mother?"

"Getting along very well."

"When will my wife arrive?" Mr. Aborn asked anxiously.

"She's taking a night plane from Miami to the Hamilton airport," Mrs. Donnell replied. "My husband will meet her."

Cathy's mother then went to the kitchen to prepare a light meal for Mr. Aborn. Nancy excused herself and went to wash her face, legs, and grimy hands. Refreshed, she returned to the living room, wondering what was keeping Jim so long.

"He'll be here soon, Nancy," said Cathy.

"I'll feel much better when I know everything's all right at home," Nancy replied.

While Mr. Aborn ate, the pretty detective told the others of Stumpy Dowd's connection with Mr. Drew's case.

"What a story!" Mr. Donnell exclaimed.

Nancy excused herself for a moment and went to the front door to listen for Jim's car. As she stood on the steps her heart suddenly leaped. A tall figure stood up from behind a bush near the front steps.

"Nancy?" a man's voice called softly.

Nancy knew who it was. "Dad!" she cried out.

Carson Drew leaped the steps and gave his daughter a resounding kiss. "Are you all right?" he whispered.

When Nancy said yes, and that it was safe to talk aloud, Don Cameron and Laura emerged from some shrubbery.

"We saw lights and heard voices," Laura explained. "We thought it was the Aborns. What's going on here, Nancy?"

"Yes, tell us!" Don urged.

Once again Nancy explained what had happened. Carson Drew listened to his daughter's story of her encounter with the thief, a stern expression on his face.

"You were lucky to come out of this so well," he remarked.

"Yes," Laura agreed. "And it's so wonderful to have a guardian whom you say is nice!"

"Mr. Aborn is a fine person, Laura," Nancy said. "I'll take you in to meet him in a minute."

Carson Drew now brought Nancy up to date on his news, and ended by saying, "We were so worried we drove here immediately, not even taking time to call the police."

Don added that they had left Mr. Drew's car at the end of the lane and were scouting the house to see if Nancy were inside when she had appeared on the front steps.

"How many times I wished you were here!" said Nancy. She now suggested that everyone come into the house to meet the others. "Jim Donnell," she added, "should return any minute."

"I'll wait for the young man out here and act as guard in case the Dowds show up," Carson Drew said, sitting down on a step. "The rest of you run along—"

As Nancy walked inside with Don and Laura she saw that Mr. and Mrs. Donnell were helping Mr. Aborn up the stairs to his bedroom. Hearing voices, the guardian turned, looked at his ward, and exclaimed:

"Laura dear—at last—I'd know you anywhere! You look just like your mother!"

"Mr. Aborn!" Laura cried out. She raced up the steps and gave her guardian a big kiss.

Introductions were quickly made, and when Mr. Aborn was settled in his bed, he had a visit

with Laura and Nancy. But after they had chatted for a few minutes the girls could see that the man needed sleep badly.

"We'll say good night now," said Nancy. "Sweet dreams." She turned off the light, and they went downstairs.

When Nancy and Laura reached the first floor, they found Mr. Drew and Jim Donnell talking in the hall with a state trooper. While Cathy took Laura aside, Nancy walked toward the group.

She was introduced to Sergeant Murphy, then Carson Drew explained to her that the state police were putting all available cars on the chase and hoped to round up the Dowds and their accomplice shortly.

"Good!" Nancy exclaimed. "But what about Mrs. Gruen?"

Sergeant Murphy said that he had talked with Chief McGinnis. The River Heights official had immediately sent a patrol car and four men to the Drews' home.

"Your housekeeper was relieved to hear that you, Miss Drew, had been found," he reported. "Nothing unusual has happened at your home tonight. But it will be closely guarded until the Dowds and their accomplice are caught."

"Oh, I'm glad," said Nancy. Sergeant Murphy left, after saying he would check back later.

Nancy and Mr. Drew walked into the living room, and she introduced her father to Mr. and Mrs. Donnell and Cathy. After a few minutes of excited conversation, the young sleuth said:

"Dad, I have a hunch that the man 'Fred' whom Stumpy Dowd mentioned is someone employed at the Monroe National Bank. Tell me, was Mrs. Pendleton's name ever mentioned in connection with the missing securities?"

Mr. Drew shook his head. "No, Nancy, it wasn't."

"Then," said Nancy, "I think we're going to find that Laura's bonds were never deposited in the bank's vault. Whoever took them and passed them on to Stumpy Dowd must be someone who works in the custodian department of the bank."

"That's good reasoning, Nancy," her father agreed, "but we have checked almost all the employees and they've been given a clean bill of health. One man, Mr. Hamilton's assistant, has been on vacation and we won't be able to interview him for another week or so."

"What's the man's name?" Nancy asked.

Mr. Drew consulted a list of names which he took from his pocket. "William Frednich."

Nancy snapped her fingers. "Frednich! Maybe he's the 'Fred' the Dowds were talking about. And if he is," she continued excitedly, "I think they're together and I believe I know where the Dowds are hiding out with this man!"

Carson Drew looked at his daughter in amazement. "Where?" he asked.

"Not far from here," Nancy said mysteriously. Then she jumped up from her chair. "Let's find out, Dad!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Night Trail

CARSON DREW, startled, looked at his daughter.

"Where do you think the Dowds and Fred are hiding, Nancy?"

"In a bungalow on Twin Lakes—the one I told you we stayed in after Laura rescued us," she explained. "My main reasons for thinking so are these: I saw a black foreign car come from there, and the place was well-stocked with food. Fred may have been living there."

"Go on. This is interesting," the lawyer said.

Nancy's hunch was that the thieves had first planned the bank theft, then the Dowds had rented the bungalow under an assumed name.

"Makes sense." Carson Drew nodded.

"Fred," Nancy continued, "knew of Laura's large estate and jewelry, and got the idea of having Stumpy Dowd impersonate Mr. Aborn. In order to get the jewelry they had to have Laura with them, so they decided to take her to the Melrose Lake house."

"Good logic," said Mr. Drew. "Then, when the real Mr. Aborn appeared, they had to kidnap him temporarily. Well, we'll follow your hunch. Shall we go?"

The others offered to go, but Mr. Drew thought that the Donnells should stay with Mr. Aborn and Laura.

"Please do," Nancy added. "After all, my hunch could be wrong. The Dowds may return here."

"We'll nab 'em if they do!" Jim said determinedly.

A few minutes later Mr. Drew's car was on the detour again, heading for the Twin Lakes road. When they reached it, there were no other cars in evidence.

"That's odd," said Nancy, knowing that this was the only road which connected the two resorts.

"Oh, oh!" said Don. "Look!"

Mr. Drew had also seen a small red light a few hundred feet distant. He slowed up. Ahead was a gate obstruction across the highway. On it was nailed a sign which read:

ROAD UNDER CONSTRUCTION
Travel at your own risk

"This is great!" Mr. Drew remarked unhappily.

"Maybe it won't be too bad " Nancy said. "I came this way the other day and I think I know all the turns."

"Why don't we try it, sir?" Don spoke up.

"All right."

Don got out of the car and moved the barrier enough so Mr. Drew could drive through. They went slowly, because of the steam shovels, bulldozers, and equipment parked along the road.

To make matters worse, the pavement was gone in places where repairs were being made. The car tires wallowed in soft dirt.

Soon, however, they reached the end of the construction section and Carson Drew stepped on the accelerator. The car responded with a burst of speed.

"We're not far from Twin Lakes now," Nancy said as she spotted a few familiar landmarks.

Don wanted to know what the plan would be when they reached the bungalow. Mr. Drew said they would first check to see if the foreign car were in the vicinity. "Of course it will be hidden."

"Next," Nancy added, "we'll have to make sure Fred and the Dowds are there, and not some innocent people. But if Stumpy's there, we'll notify the police. Right, Dad?"

"Unless Dowd sees us first," he said grimly.

Nancy said she hoped this would not happen. “But I suppose they probably will have someone acting as a lookout.”

“As I understand it, Nancy,” said her father, “the bungalow is in an isolated spot.”

“Yes, and there are a lot of trees around it.”

“Could anyone inside the house make a getaway by boat?” Don asked.

“Not easily,” Nancy answered. “The bungalow is not built over the water. It’s some distance from the lake and there’s no dock where a boat could be tied.” Presently she said, “We’re about a mile from the bungalow.”

Carson Drew’s face tensed. He drove to a point about a tenth of a mile from the lane leading down to the bungalow, then stopped the car in a clearing off the road.

“We’ll cover the rest of the distance on foot,” he announced.

As Nancy got out the right-hand side of the car after Don she glanced at the luminous dial on the clock. It was three o’clock in the morning!

Walking three abreast, the sleuths saw the bungalow below. It was in darkness.

“I don’t see any sign of a car,” Don whispered to Nancy, as he guided her by the arm.

Carson Drew was silent, but suddenly he jerked to attention. A twig had snapped. Now they saw a man walking toward the trio through the woods!

As Don, Nancy, and Mr. Drew ducked behind some shrubbery, they noticed that the man approaching them was carrying a fishing pole and a box of the type ordinarily used for bait.

Passing by the watchers, he walked unhurriedly toward the beach. At this moment the moon chose to show itself brilliantly, and Nancy observed that the man was tall and heavy.

“Hello, Sam,” he said, and now the watchers could see a rowboat and passenger gliding out of the shadows.

“I hope the fish are biting well this morning.” His voice carried clearly in the stillness.

The fisherman deposited his gear in the boat, and the two companions shoved off. They were barely out of sight when Don whispered hoarsely, “A light in the bungalow.”

From the second-story window had come a flash of light. It did not reappear.

“Someone’s up there!” Nancy whispered. “Maybe the fisherman alerted him.”

“Let’s circle the house,” said Carson Drew, and suggested that he take the left half of the circle while Nancy and Don took the right. They would meet back at this same spot in a few minutes.

“Be careful now,” he warned the young people.

“You too, Dad,” Nancy said.

The route Nancy and Don took led past the door into the first floor of the boathouse bungalow. Cautiously they listened at the exit. There was no sound from within. They went on to the beach side.

The two tiptoed among the shadows as far as the center of the rear of the building without incident, then quietly returned to the meeting place. When they arrived, Mr. Drew was not there.

“That’s funny,” said Nancy, a little alarmed. “Where is Dad?”

Just then she and Don heard a low groan. It seemed to come from behind a tree about twenty feet away. Forgetting caution, the couple rushed to the spot. Behind its broad trunk a man lay sprawled on the ground. Mr. Drew!

“Dad!” Nancy exclaimed, kneeling down. She felt the lawyer’s pulse. It was steady.

“I think he was knocked out,” said Don angrily. “Nancy, you’re right about this being a hide-out. We must get the police!”

“And right away!” Nancy agreed, as Carson Drew sat up groggily. In a moment he could talk.

The lawyer said that after leaving Nancy and Don he had started around the bungalow. Someone had come from behind and struck him. “I suppose he dragged me here.”

“Stumpy Dowd, I’ll bet!” Nancy exclaimed. “And this may mean that he and his wife made a getaway while Don and I were on the other side of the bungalow! Dad, do you feel well enough to try to follow them?”

“Yes, but where did they go?” he asked. “And how? By boat, car, or on foot?”

As if in answer to his question, the three suddenly saw in the clear moonlight the figures of two men and a woman running up the bungalow lane toward the road. Each man carried a big suitcase. Laura’s inheritance and Mr. Aborn’s little fortune!

“After them!” Don cried.

But Mr. Drew could not make it. He tottered unsteadily and leaned against the pine. “Go

on!" he said.

"No!" Nancy replied quickly. "Don, bring Dad's car here, will you?"

As the boy started off, the trio heard the muffled backfire of an automobile coming from the direction of the woods across the main road.

"Hurry, Don!" Nancy urged. "They had a car hidden there."

By the time Don returned, Carson Drew felt better. He suggested that Nancy drive, since she was more familiar with the road. When everyone was in the car, with the lawyer in the rear seat, they took off.

Upon reaching the road, the young sleuth turned right. "I think this is the direction the other car took," she said. "Anyway, it leads to Stamford, where I know there's a state police headquarters."

Carson Drew sat up groggily

The road became rough and was full of sharp turns. Nancy drove fast but carefully, slowing at each curve. There was no sign of another car until Don suddenly cried out:

"I think we're approaching a car!"

Nancy peered forward intently. She saw nothing but the road ahead.

"It's hidden now by that hill in front of us," Don told her.

There was a long moment of suspense, then Nancy exclaimed, "I see it!"

"Do you think it's the Dowds?" Don asked.

“It could be,” Mr. Drew replied.

As the car reached a smooth, straight piece of road, Nancy put it to a faster and faster pace.

“We’re gaining on them!” Don said exuberantly.

Little by little the Drew sedan crept up on the car ahead. Soon its headlights spotlighted the rear of the other vehicle—a black foreign car! Three figures were silhouetted inside it!

At the same moment Nancy caught sight of a huge black-and-white checkerboard sign at the side of the road. A bad curve ahead! With well-timed precision, Nancy eased up on her speed and gradually used her brake, knowing that abrupt pressure might cause a bad skid.

“That other driver isn’t paying any attention to the warning!” Don exclaimed.

The snakelike curve was only a few hundred feet ahead on a steep downgrade. The occupants of the Drew sedan held their breath. Would the others make the turn? There came a violent screech of brakes.

“Oh no!” Nancy cried out in horror.

As she and her companions watched, the foreign car shot off the edge of the road and plunged down a steep cliff !

CHAPTER XIX

Missing Property

STUNNED by the accident to the speeding car, Nancy brought the sedan to a halt at the curve. Everyone inside was reluctant to look down into the ravine below, from which there was not a sound.

But only for an instant. Then Carson Drew urged, "Out, everyone, quickly! We must do what we can for those people!"

Nancy and Don sprang from the car and rushed to the edge of the road. The lawyer was close behind them.

As the three gazed down into the ravine, the first light of dawn revealed that the foreign car had rolled nearly to the bottom of it and overturned against a boulder. A wheel had been torn loose from its axle and the body had been smashed in. There was no sign of any of the three occupants.

A silence held the trio above. It was inconceivable that anyone in the wreck could be alive!

At last Carson Drew found his voice. "I guess we'd better notify the police and emergency squad," he said.

Don agreed, but Nancy thought they should first see if by chance any of the accident victims were alive.

Mr. Drew and Don nodded, and followed Nancy as she scrambled down the incline. Nancy, in the lead, gasped as she saw the body of a strange man, apparently not the driver, which had been flung out of the car into a clump of bushes near the wreck. She also noticed gasoline spilling from a hole in the tank. Vaguely she thought of fire and an explosion.

"Hurry!" she urged.

As the three drew closer they saw a man's leg and a woman's high-heeled shoe protruding from beneath the left-hand side of the car.

With frantic haste Don and Mr. Drew dragged the man out, while Nancy tugged at the woman's body. Stumpy Dowd and his wife! Both were breathing, but unconscious. The victims, cut and badly bruised, were carried to a safe place on the grass.

"Now let's see about the other man, Mr. Drew," urged Don.

As they headed for the bushes where he lay, Nancy stared at the car. "The suitcases!" she thought. "Laura's inheritance and Mr. Aborn's little fortune! I must get them out before they may be burned up!"

Crawling under the wreck, she began to grope about frantically. Her hand struck a suitcase and she dragged it out.

At that instant Nancy realized how hot the metal was. There might be spontaneous combustion at any second. She must work fast to save the second suitcase!

"It's the only way I can ever repay Laura for saving my life on Twin Lakes!" Nancy thought.

By feeling around she found the bag and triumphantly brought it out, only to be jerked from the scene by Carson Drew and Don.

"Nancy!" Carson Drew cried, white-faced and horror-stricken. "Are you mad? Those suitcases aren't worth your life!"

There was a sudden explosion. Then flames enveloped the car and the dry grass in the immediate vicinity began to burn.

Don Cameron shuddered, but looked at Nancy, admiration showing in his eyes. "You're the most courageous girl I've ever met," he said slowly. "Nancy, you might have been killed!"

As she herself realized what a narrow escape she had had, Nancy breathed a prayer of thanksgiving. She was shaken and silent as the men threw dirt on the flames to keep them from spreading. When they finished, Don told Nancy that he and Mr. Drew thought the third man would be all right, although the stranger as well as the Dowds were injured, perhaps seriously.

"Now I suppose we must get the three of them to a hospital as fast as we can," he said.

At that moment they all heard the low whine of an ambulance alarm. This was followed by a police siren.

Nancy, Mr. Drew, and Don looked at one another hopefully. "Do you suppose—" Nancy began.

She was right. Help had come! A moment later police and emergency squad cars stopped at the top of the ravine. Four officers, two stretcher-bearers, and an intern, clad in white, hurried down to the group.

"Thank goodness," said Mr. Drew. Introductions were quickly made, then he asked, "How did you know about the accident?"

An officer, Lieutenant Gill, told him that a farmer living not far away had seen the speeding car go off the road and notified headquarters.

"When we heard it was a black foreign car, we were suspicious immediately," he said. "Can you identify these people as the Dowds?"

"From pictures, yes," said Mr. Drew, and briefly told the whole story of the Dowd affair up to the present moment.

"And I can testify that they were impersonating the Aborns," Nancy added.

"Anybody know who the other man is?" Lieutenant Gill inquired.

"I believe," Mr. Drew replied, "that he's William Frednich, assistant to the president of the River Heights branch of the Monroe National Bank. He's suspected of removing certain securities from the bank."

During this conversation the intern had been examining the accident victims and the attendants had laid them on stretchers. The doctor reported that the victims had been given first aid and had revived. They would be in good shape after a short stay in the hospital.

"They'll get a nice long rest after that," said Lieutenant Gill, "in the state pen. I shan't try to question them now."

As the prisoners were carried up to the ambulance, with the others following, Lieutenant Gill explained to the Dowds how Nancy had saved them from being burned in the wreckage.

"I don't believe it," said Stumpy ungratefully. His wife was more gracious. "Thanks, Miss Drew. And I want to tell you I'm tired of this whole business. You're only a kid but you've really taught me a lesson."

Nancy did not answer. She found herself choking up, and tears came into her eyes.

As the ambulance moved away, Nancy, quickly brushing her moist eyes dry with the backs of her hands, turned toward the east. She observed that a beautiful sunrise was beginning to flood the sky with brilliant color.

Don yawned. "What do you say we head for home?" he suggested. "Otherwise, I'll never be able to make my sister's wedding this evening."

"Oh dear!" Nancy exclaimed. "I forgot all about it. Please forgive us for keeping you up all night."

Don grinned. "I wouldn't have missed this excitement for anything!"

"I suggest," said Mr. Drew, "that we go back to Nancy's hotel and the Drews will get some sleep. Don, you take my car and return to River Heights. Later, Nancy and I will take a taxi and pick up her convertible at the Aborns'."

"Thank you, sir. I'll do that."

While the three had been talking, Lieutenant Gill had been wedging open one of the two locked suitcases which Nancy had taken from the wrecked car. Mr. Drew and the others walked over as he lifted the lid.

The bag was jammed with feminine clothing. There were several dresses, a large make-up kit, pieces of lingerie, shoes, and several wigs—a gray one, a black hairpiece, and one which was decidedly auburn.

"That clinches it, Dad!" Nancy exclaimed. "Mrs. Dowd must have gone around in disguise to cash the bonds."

"But where's the money she got?" Don asked.

"It must be in the other bag," Nancy suggested, "together with securities and money belonging to Laura Pendleton, Mr. Aborn, and River Heights bank clients."

Lieutenant Gill opened the second suitcase. It contained men's clothing and toilet articles.

"Nancy, you risked your life for this!" Don exclaimed.

Nancy Drew could not believe her eyes. Had she been mistaken in believing that Stumpy Dowd had put the contents of Mr. Aborn's safe in the bags? Quickly she glanced down at the

foreign car. Had Laura's inheritance and other people's money burned in it?

The thought stunned the young sleuth. But in a moment an idea came to her.

"There's just a possibility the papers *are* here," she said.

All eyes turned on the girl detective, as the group awaited a further explanation.

CHAPTER XX

A Surprise Gift

"I'M SURE," said Nancy, "that Mr. Dowd not only put the money and securities in one of these suitcases, but never removed them!"

"Then *where* are they?" Don asked.

Nancy smiled. "These bags may have false bottoms!"

Lieutenant Gill said, "Why, of course. I should have thought of that."

Kneeling down, he soon found that Nancy was right. The bottom of each bag opened up, disclosing packages of thousand-dollar bills and securities.

"Good thinking, Nancy," said Don admiringly. "You're a whiz of a detective, all right."

It took Mr. Drew and the officers several minutes to count the large sum of money and make a rough estimate of the value of the stocks and bonds. When they finished, the officer gave Carson Drew a receipt to turn over to the president of the Monroe National Bank. Meanwhile, he would take the stolen property to police headquarters and send on a detailed report.

A few minutes later Nancy's group said good-by to the officers, and returned to Mr. Drew's car. When they reached the Beach Cliff Hotel, Nancy and Mr. Drew got out. They thanked Don for all he had done.

"Don't mention it." The young man grinned. Turning to Nancy, he added, "I kept my date with you yesterday after all!"

As he got into the driver's seat Don said that when he returned the car to the Drews' home he would tell Hannah Gruen what had happened.

It was now very light. Nancy and her father, exhausted, could hardly wait to get a few hours sleep. They tumbled into their beds and slept until noon, then met in the hotel dining room for a hearty brunch.

"How's your head, Dad?" Nancy asked.

"Sound as ever!" Carson Drew said, grinning. "I don't even have a bump."

"Then we have a date," Nancy told him, waving a note. "This was at the desk. I picked it up. The clerk said Jim Donnell left it a little while ago."

"The date's with him?" Mr. Drew asked.

"No. Laura Pendleton. She says she and the Aborns are thrilled by the news which the police relayed and would like us to come to their house as soon as possible. What do you say, Dad?"

"We'll go."

As Nancy finished her pancakes and sausages she remarked that she could hardly wait to start for the Aborns' home. "I wonder if the Dowds have confessed everything and what Mr. Frednich had to say."

"In my opinion it's an open and shut case," the lawyer replied.

While Mr. Drew paid the hotel bill, Nancy called a taxi and soon the Drews were heading for Eagle Rock Lane. Reaching it, they got out of the cab and the lawyer paid the driver.

Nancy slid in behind the steering wheel of her convertible, as Mr. Drew got in on the other side. The motor started at once. "Good old Jim," Nancy said with a smile, and drove up the lane to the Aborn home.

As she parked, the front door was opened by a woman of about forty-five. Her pretty face showed humor, kindness, and intelligence.

After the Drews had introduced themselves, the woman said she was Marian Aborn and had reached home "in the wee small hours" because her plane was late. "I've been most eager to meet you two," she added, smiling. "How can I ever thank you for all you've done?"

As the callers went inside, Laura Pendleton hurried down from the second floor. After greeting Mr. Drew she gave Nancy a kiss and exclaimed, "Everything is so wonderful-you've

captured the thieves and recovered all the money—and I have the nicest guardians anyone could ever hope for!"

"And Jacob and I have a daughter to love!" said Marian Aborn, smiling fondly at Laura.

Nancy asked how Mr. Aborn felt. His wife said, "Come see for yourselves," and led the way to a small study at the rear of the house.

She knocked, then opened the door, and Nancy heard the steady drum of typewriter keys. Jacob Aborn was seated behind the machine.

The erstwhile cellar prisoner already looked like a new man. His face was flooded with color, and his eyes were alert and happy. Now he stood up, greeted the Drews, and expressed his great appreciation for all they had done in recovering his and Laura's property.

He grinned at Nancy. "First time a girl ever risked her life for me!" he said. "To show my appreciation I'm writing my adventure. You know, writing is my business. If I sell this one to a magazine, I'm going to give the proceeds to Nancy's favorite charity—the River Heights Youth Center!"

"Why, that's terrific!" Nancy exclaimed.

Mrs. Aborn's face sobered. She said that she had not yet heard the entire story of what had happened. Before anyone had a chance to tell her, the doorbell rang. Lieutenant Gill walked in with Chief McGinnis of River Heights and another man. While Nancy greeted the officers, her father hurried to shake hands with the stranger.

"This is Mr. Seward, president of the Monroe National Bank," he announced a moment later, and introduced the dignified white-haired man.

The president's glance included the policemen as he said, "I want to thank all of you in person for the splendid job you did in capturing the Dowds and the two bank employees involved in the thefts."

"There is a fourth man?" Nancy asked in amazement.

Mr. Seward explained that Alma Dowd's brother, Joe Jackson, had been employed by the Monroe National Bank in their vault department for some time. He and Frednich had cooked up the scheme of taking the securities. They had done this between audits of the bank's holdings. Frednich, in his job as assistant custodian, had known exactly how to place his hands on the valuable stocks and bonds.

"Frednich overheard Mrs. Pendleton's discussion with me about Laura and the large estate she would inherit some day," Mr. Seward said, "and also that Mr. Aborn would be her guardian. When Frednich learned that Laura Pendleton had a valuable jewelry collection, he instantly thought of a swindle scheme. Frednich had chanced to meet Mr. Aborn one time while vacationing at Melrose Lake. He had been amazed by the strong resemblance between Aborn and Stumpy Dowd, whom Alma's brother had introduced to Frednich. He asked Dowd to impersonate Mr. Aborn and to move up the date when Laura would come to the guardian's home. He even deposited some securities with the bank in Stumpy's name, so there would be no question of Dowd's having anything to do with the thefts."

"Where is Joe Jackson now?" Nancy asked.

Chief McGinnis said he would answer this question. "We caught him cruising by the Drews' home. When we stopped the car, he tried to escape. After the whole story broke, we got a confession from him. He was going to burglarize your home, Nancy, to find the jewels."

"There's one thing I don't understand," said Mrs. Aborn. "Why did the Dowds rent the bungalow when they had helped themselves to this house?"

Nancy grinned. "I'm sure I know," she said. "Dowd was smart enough not to want either Frednich or Jackson to stay here—just in case anyone from the bank traced the thefts to them before Dowd could make a getaway. So he had Alma Dowd rent the bungalow and convinced Frednich that it was a good hide-out."

After Mr. Aborn and Laura had signed statements for the police, the officers and Mr. Seward left. Nancy suddenly felt a sense of loneliness and realized it was because her work on the case was at an end. Would another mystery come her way to solve? she wondered. And it did. In less than a week, Nancy was facing up to the challenge of *The Mystery at Lilac Inn.*

Nancy and her father now said good-by to the family at Eagle Rock. As Nancy gave Laura a farewell hug, she asked, "When will you come to get your jewelry?"

Laura consulted her guardian, who said the next day would be convenient for them to drive to River Heights. "Will three o'clock be all right?"

"Yes indeed."

The following afternoon Laura Pendleton and the Aborns arrived promptly. After iced tea

and some of Hannah's delicious open-faced sandwiches, Laura whispered to Mr. Drew that she would love to get her jewelry from the safe. Excusing himself, Nancy's father left the room and returned in a few minutes with the package, which he handed to Laura.

Nancy, meanwhile, was listening to Jacob Aborn's surprising news that he had finished his story and was sending it to a leading magazine.

"Wonderful!" said Nancy. As she said this, she looked up to see Laura standing before her. In the girl's hand was the beautiful aquamarine ring Nancy had admired earlier in the week.

"I'd like you to wear this," Laura said shyly, "as a reminder that our friendship began on the water." Quickly she slipped the ring on the third finger of Nancy's right hand.

The pretty detective gave an exclamation of delight and admired the gift for a long moment. Then she showed it to the others. At last she turned to Laura and said with genuine sincerity:

"The ring is priceless and I'll always treasure it as a reminder of you—although no one can place a value on a true friendship like ours."

Seeing tears in Laura's eyes, Nancy added quickly with a grin, "Even if we had to be shipwrecked to get an introduction!"

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The Mystery at Lilac Inn

BY CAROLYN KEENE

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Suddenly a panel in the wall slid open

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CHAPTER I

Mysterious Canoe Mishap

"NANCY Drew! How did you and Helen paddle that canoe up here so fast from River Heights?" cried Doris Drake in astonishment.

Nancy, an attractive titian blond, grinned up at her friend. Doris was weeding a flower garden at her home along the riverbank. "How do you know when we left home?" Nancy's blue eyes twinkled.

"My friend Phyl told me on the phone just half an hour ago that she'd talked with you, Nancy, at the Elite Drug Store in River Heights."

Nancy looked surprised. "She couldn't have. Helen and I were on our way here at that time."

Slender, pretty Helen Corning, three years older than Nancy, frowned. "You must have a double, Nancy. Better watch out!"

"I can't understand it," Nancy murmured. "You say Phyl *talked* to her and she didn't say it was a mistake?"

"That's right, Nancy," said Doris. "But Phyl was wrong, of course. After all, she doesn't know you terribly well. Say, where are you and Helen going?"

"To visit overnight with Emily Willoughby and her aunt at Lilac Inn. They're family friends. Emily and her fiancé—we've never met him—have bought the inn, and Em tells me, plan to run it full time."

Helen added, "Nancy and I are to be Emily's bridesmaids. We'll talk over wedding plans."

"How wonderful!" Doris exclaimed.

Nancy and Helen said good-by and paddled off upstream. The Angus River, a tributary of the Muskoka, was banked on either side with dense shrubbery, willow trees, and wild flowers.

"We're almost to Benton," Nancy said. "The old inn should be just beyond the next bend."

The next second something rammed the canoe violently. The impact capsized the craft, hurling Nancy and Helen into the chilly May water!

Fortunately, the girls were excellent swimmers. Each instinctively grasped her buoyant, waterproof canvas traveling bag, bobbing nearby, and swam to a grassy bank.

"Whew!" said Nancy, as she dropped her bag to the ground. "Are you all right, Helen?"

Her friend nodded, shivering in her bedraggled shirt and slacks, despite the warm sun. "What made us capsize?"

The impact capsized the canoe

Nancy shrugged. She kicked off her moccasins and plunged into the water again to find out, and to retrieve the canoe. It was drifting upside down a short distance away.

After righting the canoe, Nancy towed it to where they had overturned. She ducked her head beneath the unruffled surface, but saw nothing unusual in the twenty-foot-deep water.

“That’s strange,” she thought. “Maybe we hit a floating log.” But this explanation did not fully satisfy her. A drifting log probably would be still in sight, and there was none.

Nancy pushed the canoe toward shore. Helen grabbed the stern, and pulled the canoe far enough up the bank so the girls could examine it. To their relief, it was undamaged.

“Did you see that man with the crew cut in the rowboat?” Helen asked,

“No. Where?”

Helen pointed to a small, high dock fifty feet downstream. She said that while Nancy was

swimming, the man had climbed from the water into a rowboat, glanced their way, then gone in the opposite direction.

"He didn't even try to help us!" Helen said indignantly. "Do you think maybe *he* upset our canoe?"

"I don't see how he could have." Nancy smiled. "But he has upset *you.* Let's go!"

The girls stepped back into the canoe and pad-died off. As they rounded the next bend, Helen cried, "There's the Lilac Inn dock!"

When the canoe came abreast of the dock, Nancy secured it to a post. The girls hopped out and started up the path that led to the inn. On both sides of the path were groves of lilac trees which displayed a profusion of blooms, from creamy white to deep purple.

As the girls gazed in delight, a voice called, "Nancy! Helen! I'm so glad to see you. But what, ever happened?"

"Emily! Pretend I'm hugging you," Nancy said with a laugh, and explained their accident.

Emily Willoughby, a dainty young woman, had chestnut-colored hair, set off to advantage by her white linen dress.

Beside her stood a handsome, well-built man with wavy, black hair. Nancy and Helen assumed the young man was her fiancé, Dick Farnham, but Emily introduced him as John McBride, an old friend of Dick's.

"John is going to be Dick's best man," Emily explained.

John smiled cordially. "Dick and I were boyhood friends in California, and roommates at college. I'm an Army sergeant on a month's leave." He looked at the new arrivals with twinkling eyes. "Emily will tell you why I'm here. And I'm sure glad I am."

"Now don't go making up to my friends, John," Emily teased. "Helen is engaged to Jim Archer, who has a position with an oil company overseas, and Nancy—well, she's mighty busy these days."

The visitors laughed, as Emily added, "You girls change into dry clothes at once."

John carried their bags, as Emily led the way along a shrubbed path which opened onto the spacious lawn surrounding Lilac Inn. Helen and Nancy looked with admiration at the historic hotel, erected in Revolutionary times.

"Here are the new guest cottages," Emily said, as they reached a group of twelve trim white units. "And this one is where you'll stay."

She unlocked the door of the second cottage and the friends stepped inside. John set down the bags. "See you girls later," he said.

As Helen admired the attractive colonial-style bedroom, Nancy noticed a look of anxiety in Emily's eyes. But the next instant it vanished.

Nancy and Helen listened with great interest while their friend said that she and Dick were enlarging the inn. "John has been a big help with our projects. Dick is in New York working on publicity for us."

"I'm sure Lilac Inn will be a bang-up success," Nancy told her.

"Oh, I hope so," Emily said. For a fleeting moment Nancy again detected a worried look in the young woman's eyes. Why?

Emily went on, "You're almost the first guests in our cottage section—John was first. He's staying near you. The official opening of the inn won't be until July first. That is, if we can complete everything by then," she added dubiously.

"If your aunt is here, Em, I'd love to see her," Nancy said.

"Aunt Hazel's been looking forward to seeing you. I'll tell her you've arrived. Come over to the inn after you've unpacked."

Nancy and Helen changed into pastel cotton dresses, put away the few belongings they had brought, then headed for the inn. As they walked across the lawn, they passed gardeners who were pruning trees and cultivating flower beds edged with pansies.

"It's perfectly beautiful here," Helen remarked.

The girls went to the front of the inn, a two-story clapboard building with a one-level wing on either side. All around it were lilac trees and other flowering bushes. Nancy and Helen mounted the wide steps and entered the center hall. Its paneled walls, old staircase, and beautiful cut-glass chandelier made them feel as though they had stepped back into an earlier century.

The reservation desk was in an alcove off the hallway. John McBride was just putting a letter into the outgoing mail slot.

"Hi!" He grinned. "Ready for a tour of inspection ? Delighted to escort you."

"We accept." Helen smiled. "After Nancy and I say hello to Emily's Aunt Hazel."

Just then Emily entered the hall. "Aunt Hazel is—er—busy, but she'll be free in a few minutes. In the meantime, I must speak to Mr. Daly, the former owner of Lilac Inn. He's staying to manage the dining room, which we've kept open for business."

She led the girls to a narrow corridor which ran off the lobby. "Why don't you two wait for Aunt Hazel and me in my office? It's the fourth door down."

Nancy and Helen proceeded along the corridor. As they passed the second door, which was partially open, the girls heard a familiar voice say:

"I can't lend you any more money, Maud! Please don't ask me again!"

Before Nancy and Helen could retreat, Aunt Hazel Willoughby walked quickly from the room. She was followed by a younger woman who had an angry look on her rather pretty but petulant face.

"Nancy! Helen!" Emily's aunt exclaimed, stopping short. "How nice to see you both herel I'm so glad you can be Emily's attendants."

"We are too." Nancy smiled and Helen added, "Emily's going to be a lovely bride."

Mrs. Willoughby, a woman of fifty-five, beamed. White hair framed her face in soft waves, and she was impeccably groomed. She introduced her companion as Mrs. Maud Potter, and said she was to be the inn's social director for the summer.

"That sounds exciting," said Nancy pleasantly.

For a moment Maud's eyes narrowed. Then she tossed her head. "I may not be here July first!" she exploded, and walked away rapidly.

The girls, somewhat taken aback, looked inquiringly at Mrs. Willoughby. The older woman, flustered, made no explanation. She excused herself and hurried after Maud.

Nancy and Helen exchanged glances.

"What a way for a social director to act!" Helen said in disgust. "I wonder why the two women were quarreling about money."

At that moment Emily rejoined the girls and led them into her office. The room was cozy, with a braided rug and pine furniture. The desk in front of the window was cluttered with papers.

"Dick's!" Emily laughed. Then she sobered. "He is worried about finances, poor boy! So far he hasn't been able to raise as much capital as we need," she confided. "I had a hard time convincing him to agree to a certain idea of mine."

"Can you tell us about it?" Nancy asked.

Before Emily could answer, there was a cry of pain from somewhere in the garden. The three girls dashed outside through the front entrance.

Apparently one of the gardeners had stumbled into a large hole in a pathway being strewn with gravel. The man was moaning.

"Oh, Hank!" Emily gasped.

The girls hurried to his side and discovered that one of his legs had gone down through some soft earth.

“Pull me out!” the gardener demanded.

With the girls’ assistance, Hank was freed.

“I hope your leg’s not broken,” Emily said solicitously.

Hank shook his head. “Just a bad sprain. I wasn’t lookin’ where I was goin’. What I can’t figure out is how that hole got here. Queer things have been goin’ on at this inn. I’m thinkin’ of quit-tin’. Anyhow, I’m goin’ home now.”

“Oh, don’t quit!” Emily cried.

Several other gardeners had rushed up. All denied having dug the hole. Emily asked one of them, a thin, narrow-eyed young man, named Gil Gary, to drive Hank to his house.

The other men returned to their work, but the girls remained at the site of the accident. Emily’s face was troubled.

Nancy said impulsively, “Something’s bothering you, Em. What is it?”

Emily’s whispered reply astonished her friends. “Dick and I seem to have a mysterious enemy. He is trying to jinx Lilac Inn!”

CHAPTER II

Strange Happenings

A JINX on Lilac Inn! Nancy and Helen stared at Emily in astonishment.

"Tell us about it," Nancy urged her friend.

Emily sighed. "I will. I didn't want to worry Aunt Hazel, so I've kept my suspicions to myself."

The chestnut-haired girl said that four days ago her fiancé had left for New York. Prior to that time, everything had been running smoothly at the inn. An hour after Dick's departure, one of the waitresses had come to Emily's office to give notice.

"When I asked her why she was dissatisfied, she said it was because the inn was—was haunted!"

"What did she mean?" Nancy asked.

Emily said she had not taken the statement seriously. "At the time I was sure the waitress, Mary Mason, was just making up an excuse for leaving. She packed and left on the bus to River Heights that day. Now I'm not so sure she hadn't seen something strange.

"Sunday morning Gil Gary reported that our finest lilac tree near the front entrance had been stolen. No ghost did that!"

"What a shame!" Helen exclaimed.

"Mr. Daly was heartbroken," Emily said unhappily. "Several years ago he rooted this lilac—the Lucie Baltet variety with a lovely pinkish flower. It was just beginning to blossom abundantly.

"The third strange occurrence," Emily continued, "was around twelve o'clock last night. I was awakened by the sound of music and traced it to our record player in the recreation room. No one was there."

"Perhaps someone at the inn was playing a joke," Nancy suggested.

"No. Everyone denied this," Emily answered. "A window in the recreation room was partially open. It looked as though it had been forced. And I know all the windows had been closed earlier."

There was a thoughtful silence for several seconds, then Emily linked arms with her chums. "I won't worry you with any more mysteries," she said. "Let's have lunch and later concentrate on wedding plans."

Near the dining-room door Emily stopped to introduce her friends to a kind-faced, white-haired man. "This is Mr. Daly, the former owner, whom I told you about. I just couldn't get along without him. I'm so glad he decided to stay awhile, even though he wants to retire."

"How do you do?" Nancy and Helen smiled and shook hands, then went to a corner table near an old hutch cabinet.

Nancy's mind was still on the series of events Emily had just related. It *did* sound as if something peculiar was going on at Lilac Inn!

Nancy had learned from her lawyer father, Carson Drew, that a seemingly unrelated chain of events often became a single baffling mystery. The young sleuth had found proof of this in solving several cases herself—her first being *The Secret of the Old Clock,* and more recently, *The Bungalow Mystery.*

Mrs. Willoughby and John McBride joined the girls. Emily asked them where Maud was.

"I believe she's sun-bathing on the dock," Mrs. Willoughby replied. "She ate an early lunch."

There was a tense note in the woman's voice which Nancy quickly detected. The girl detective recalled the conversation she and Helen had overheard that morning. Had further trouble developed ?

When Anna, the waitress, brought the first course of beef broth, Emily changed the subject abruptly. "Lilac Inn is really a fascinating place," she said. "The original floors are still intact, and it's rumored that George Washington ate here in the stagecoach days."

John smiled. "According to reports, our first president must have eaten at every dining place in this country!"

During the luncheon of creamed chicken on toast, peas, salad, and iced tea, Helen asked whether Emily had a neighbor who wore his hair in a crew cut. She explained about the man who had rowed off, instead of coming to the girls' rescue, when their canoe capsized. Emily and her aunt shook their heads.

"Not a very gallant guy," John remarked. He asked several questions about the man with the crew cut and seemed very much disappointed when Helen could add nothing more to the description.

Later, Nancy said to John, "Your career in the Army must be interesting. Do you have a special assignment?"

"Wish I could tell you, Nancy. But it's classified, or confidential, to civilians."

"I understand." Nancy smiled. Presently she turned to Emily. "I saw Doris Drake on the way here. Her house isn't far away, is it?"

"About a mile up the road," Emily answered.

After luncheon Emily offered to show Nancy and Helen around the inn and take them on a tour of the extensive grounds.

"I'll get the jeep for that trip," John offered.

Emily showed her friends the parlors and writing room, and the modern wing containing the pine-paneled recreation room.

"Very attractive," Nancy remarked. She spotted a record player in one corner. "Is that the one the intruder used, Emily?"

"Yes. And here's the window which I found forced open last night," Emily pointed out.

Next, Nancy and Helen were escorted upstairs to see Emily's attractive, old-fashioned two-room suite. "When the inn is ready, there'll be accommodations for fifty guests—"

At this instant a piercing shriek came from the garden. The three girls dashed down the stairs and rushed outside.

"The cry came from near the river," said Nancy, running in that direction.

John McBride and two gardeners joined them. They made a thorough search, but found no one.

Emily turned to Nancy with questioning eyes, "Are you thinking what I am—that the person screamed just to frighten us? And make this place almost seem haunted?"

"Yes. But why? Is someone trying to balk your expansion program here?" Nancy suggested.

"Possibly. But I can't figure out the reason," Emily replied. "Well, I'll show you the rest of the house."

She took the visitors to the far wing, where the kitchen was located. Its gleaming wall ovens and natural-stone colonial fireplace, complete with spit, fascinated Nancy.

"Emily, you'll have no trouble filling every room in this inn," she said enthusiastically. "It's absolutely charming!"

"I hope you're right," Emily replied fervently. "If only the mystery haunting this place could

be solved! You'll help, Nancy?"

"I'll certainly try, Emily."

The three girls went to the parking lot where John awaited them at the wheel of the jeep. "Hold onto your hats!" he called.

His three hatless passengers grinned as they hopped into the rear seat. The vehicle shot forward and turned into a dirt lane.

Soon they were driving among groves of apple and peach trees. At Emily's request, John stopped the jeep near an apple tree. She got out to examine the leafy branches. "We'll have an abundant crop this season," she commented. "There are lots of tiny apples forming."

John had climbed out also. Suddenly he stooped and examined the ground.

"What are you looking at?" Nancy called to him.

"A big fat beetle." John laughed.

Nancy chuckled, but she had the feeling that John had been evasive in his reply. As the jeep started off, she looked back. There was a trail of marks leading toward the river.

"They look like flipper tracks," she thought. "I wonder if John made them or if he suspects someone else did."

Later, when the young people returned to the inn, they found Maud Potter on the patio. Nancy was amazed at the change in the woman's manner. Now she was smiling broadly as she waved a folded newspaper.

"Nancy!" she cried effusively. "You're a skin-diving celebrity!"

"What do you mean?" Nancy asked, puzzled, as Mrs. Willoughby joined the group.

Maud opened the paper and pointed to page one of the River Heights *Evening News.*

"Why, Nancy Drew!" Helen exclaimed. "Your picture—and a write-up! You never breathed a word!"

Everyone clustered around to see the picture of Nancy in a bathing suit, diver's mask, and flippers and the accompanying article. The caption read:

Daughter of Local Lawyer, Carson Drew, Learns Her A-B Seas in Skin Diving.

The article went on to tell that Nancy had just completed a course in advanced skin diving in the Muskoka River, and that she had finished first in total points in the twenty-student group.

" 'When asked by our reporter where she hoped to practice the sport,' " John read aloud, " 'Miss Drew replied she would like to skin-dive in both salt and fresh water. This writer strongly suspects that there will be times when she will use her newly acquired knowledge in solving mysteries at which Miss Drew, we understand, is proficient.' "

With an admiring glance, John said, "Meet a fellow frogman. I practically grew up in flippers."

"Really? Oh, I have a wonderful ideal"

Nancy said she would still like to find out, if possible, what had upset her canoe so suddenly. "Maybe there is some submerged object I didn't notice. It could be a hazard to other people in boats. John, why don't you take a look underwater at that same spot?"

"How about both of us going?" John suggested, smiling.

Emily spoke up. "Nancy, you and Helen must stay here longer. You can work on the mystery and also go skin diving with John."

Both girls accepted eagerly. "We'll paddle home tomorrow," said Nancy, "pick up more clothes and my diving equipment, then come back."

For the rest of the afternoon, the three girls discussed the subject of gowns to be worn by Emily's bridal attendants. Nancy and Helen were delighted to learn that the color was to be lilac pink.

“By the way, Em,” Helen said, “do you know where lilacs came from originally?”

Their hostess nodded. “A German traveler brought the flower from the Orient to Europe in the sixteenth century. Eventually the lilac was introduced to America.”

All this time Nancy had noted that Emily was doing her best to seem cheerful, and Maud too continued to act carefree. Emily had arranged a steak cook-out on the patio, and the social director joined in the lively banter. When they finished eating, she brought out a guitar.

“How about some Western tunes?” she suggested gaily.

“Fine. Let’s all sing,” Helen answered.

At eleven o’clock the group said good night and the River Heights girls tumbled into bed.

The next morning Nancy had just finished dressing when there was a knock on the cottage door. John called out:

“Phone call for you, Nancy, at the desk in the lobby. The cottage phones aren’t connected yet.”

“Thank you.” Nancy hurried to the lobby and picked up the receiver. “Hello? ... Why, Hannah! What’s the trouble?”

Hannah Gruen was the Drews’ housekeeper, and had “mothered” Nancy since the age of three when her own mother had passed away.

“Oh, Nancy!” Hannah sounded almost hysterical. “Come home right away! Your father isn’t here, and someone broke into the house last night!”

CHAPTER III

A Stolen Charge Plate

NANCY was shocked by Hannah's news. "Have you called the police about the prowler?" she asked the housekeeper.

"No. I wanted to tell you first. I didn't know what had happened until I carried some clean clothes to your room. The second floor seems to be the only place disturbed."

Hannah explained that she had tried to reach Mr. Drew at his hotel in Cleveland, where he was working on a case. But the lawyer had been out.

"I'll be home as soon as possible," Nancy promised. "In the meantime, please notify Chief McGinnis."

"I will, Nancy. Good-by."

Nancy was just about to put down the phone, when she heard a click on the line. Instantly she wondered if someone at Lilac Inn had been purposely listening in on her call.

Before Nancy could speculate further, Emily joined her. Quickly Nancy gave her friend Hannah's report. "I must borrow a car and go right home," she said.

Emily expressed concern about the apparent burglary. "I hope nothing valuable was taken. But, Nancy, you must have breakfast before you go." Emily led the way to the dining room.

Nancy asked her where the other telephones at the inn were located and mentioned the fact that someone might have been eavesdropping on her conversation.

"Every room has an extension," Emily said. "But the only ones connected right now, besides the desk phone, are in the kitchen, my bedroom, my aunt's, and the recreation room."

The young sleuth hastily excused herself. "I'd like to make a few inquiries, Em. Meet me at the table, will you?"

Nancy went into the kitchen. She saw Anna, the waitress, and asked the girl if anyone had used the telephone within the past few minutes. No one had. Then Nancy hurried to the recreation room. It was empty.

When Nancy reached the dining room, she found Emily at the table alone. "Did you learn anything?" Emily asked.

"No."

Emily whispered, "I just remembered, Nancy. Maud had her phone hooked up yesterday."

At that moment Maud came into the dining room. Nancy learned that Maud had just returned from a walk along the river. A few minutes later Mrs. Willoughby, Helen, and John arrived. None had used the phone that morning.

"Guess that click didn't mean an eavesdropper at the inn," Nancy thought.

The others were sympathetic upon hearing her reason for returning home immediately. John promptly offered to drive Nancy in the jeep. But Mrs. Willoughby laughed and said, "I can give you a more comfortable ride, Nancy."

As she started to explain, Anna came to take the orders of those at the table.

"I have to drive to the River Heights Bank this morning," Mrs. Willoughby went on, "to get Emily's diamonds from the safe-deposit box. I'd be delighted to have company."

Before Nancy could reply, Maud Potter repeated shrilly, "Emily's *diamonds?"*

Mrs. Willoughby nodded. “As you know, I’ve been Emily’s guardian for five years, since her parents were killed in the plane crash. Her mother’s will states that she’s to receive the jewels when she’s twenty-one.”

Emily dimpled. “That’s in two weeks. But I coaxed Aunt Hazel into letting me have them earlier. I’m going to sell enough to help Dick and me with expenses at the inn.”

Nancy smiled. “That must be the plan you told me about yesterday.”

“That’s right.” Emily’s eyes sparkled.

Maud had been listening intently. She said to Mrs. Willoughby, “You told me there were twenty unset diamonds. I suppose they are worth quite a bit?”

Mrs. Willoughby smiled. “Yes. Over fifty thousand dollars.”

Maud remarked pointedly, “You’d better be careful, Hazel. Some people would love to get their hands on those jewels.”

As soon as Mrs. Willoughby finished her toast and coffee, she arose from the table. “Nancy,” she said, “I’ll get the car.”

The three girls excused themselves and went outside. “Perhaps, Helen,” Nancy said, “you’d like to stay at the inn. I’ll be driving back, and can stop at your house to pick up whatever clothes you need.”

“Thanks, Nancy. I’d like to stay. I’ll phone Mother.”

Emily asked if Nancy would have a chance to do her a favor in River Heights. “I’d ask Aunt Hazel, but she wants to get back here as soon as possible with my diamonds.”

“I’ll be glad to. What is it, Em?”

“Find out if the Empire Employment Agency has any waitresses available.”

“Did you get Mary Mason through them?” Nancy asked.

“No. She stopped here. But her references were excellent, so I engaged her.”

“I’ll be happy to do the errand for you, Emily,” Nancy said.

Mrs. Willoughby pulled up in her black sedan and Nancy climbed in front. John had come outside too.

“Don’t forget,” he said to her, “we have a skin-diving date when you get back.”

At that moment Maud Potter hurried from the inn to the car. “I’ll come along, if you don’t mind,” the social director said blithely.

She hopped in beside Nancy without waiting for an invitation. Mrs. Willoughby’s lips tightened, but she made no comment. Good-bys were exchanged and the car started off.

Soon the sedan was speeding along the main highway. “Any ideas about your burglar?” Maud asked Nancy.

“No,” Nancy admitted. “Except he might have been trying to break into Dad’s safe.”

Maud cocked her head. “Does your father keep important papers at home?”

“Sometimes,” Nancy replied noncommittally. She tried to hide her annoyance at the woman’s inquisitiveness.

Mrs. Willoughby frowned disapprovingly. “Don’t ask so many questions, Maud.”

The social director shrugged. Once more she turned to Nancy. Arching her eyebrows coyly, she said, “I’d love to meet your dad sometime. I understand he is a widower.”

“This is the last straw!” Nancy thought. Though annoyed, she had to suppress a smile at the woman’s remark. Maud Potter certainly was not the type of person to interest her father!

“Dad keeps very busy, and travels a lot on his cases,” Nancy said coolly. “He’s away now.”

Maud’s coyness vanished. “I see. No time for social life,” she said sarcastically.

To Nancy’s relief, the woman spoke hardly at all for the balance of the trip. Presently Mrs. Willoughby pulled up into the winding driveway of the Drews’ handsome brick home,

surrounded by a velvety green lawn.

Nancy expressed her thanks for the ride and said good-by. She hurried into the house, for the moment forgetting Lilac Inn completely. Hannah Gruen greeted her with, "Oh, Nancy dear. I'm so glad you're back. I've been frantic!"

Nancy hugged the pleasant-faced woman, who said that Police Chief McGinnis had stopped at the house to investigate the burglary.

"No silver or other valuables are missing," Hannah went on. "But your room is a mess. Whoever was here must have been after something you keep there." The woman frowned worriedly.

Nancy dashed up the stairs. What a sight met her eyes as she entered her room! Bureau and chest drawers were open, their contents spilling out. Perfume bottles lay overturned on her dressing table. Clothes had been pulled from the closet and flung onto the bed and floor.

Mrs. Gruen, who had followed Nancy, explained, "Chief McGinnis wanted me to leave everything like this for you to see."

Nancy nodded. "How was the house entered?"

"Through the back door," Hannah replied. "The chief said the intruder must be an expert lock picker and burglar. He left no fingerprints."

Nancy hurried into her father's bedroom. Nothing here had been disturbed apparently. She went into the adjoining den and was relieved to see that the thief had not broken into the safe.

"The only thing missing from here is my picture," Nancy reported to Hannah.

"Oh, dear! What does it all mean?" the housekeeper asked worriedly.

Before Nancy could continue, the phone rang, and she answered it.

"Miss Nancy Drew?" a woman asked.

"Yes."

"This is Burk's Department Store. I'm Mrs. Reilly of the fine jewelry department. I made a terrible mistake when I sold you that watch this morning. The price was one hundred and twenty-five dollars, not fifty as I told you. Do you still want to keep it?"

Utterly astounded, Nancy said, "Mrs. Reilly, I didn't buy a watch this morning! I was out of town."

"Isn't your charge account number 10-4875?"

"Wait, please. I'll check."

Nancy hurried to open the desk drawer where she had put Burk's charge plate. Its leather case was there, but the metal plate was not inside. "It has been stolen!" Nancy exclaimed.

With a sense of foreboding, she returned to the phone. "I'll drive right down to see the manager," Nancy said. "My charge plate has been stolen, I'm afraid."

Nancy paused long enough to tell Hannah of her discovery, and to notify Chief McGinnis. The officer said he would meet her at the store manager's office.

Just as she was about to enter Burk's, Nancy stopped short. To her amazement, she saw Maud Potter entering the Empire Employment Agency office across the street.

"Now what's up?" Nancy wondered. "Is Maud trying to engage a waitress for the inn, too?"

Puzzled, she hurried into the department store and took an elevator to the third-floor office of the manager, Mr. Goldsmith.

"I'm Nancy Drew," she greeted him pleasantly. "I want to explain—"

She got no further. With a stern look, the manager said curtly, "I know all about the watch you claim not to have bought early this morning. But how about those other items you carried away?"

Dumfounded, Nancy could only echo, "*Other* items?"

Grimly the manager continued, “I don’t know what your game is, Miss Drew. But unless you have a twin, you owe Burk’s Department Store for merchandise worth two thousand dollars!”

CHAPTER IV

Address Unknown

NANCY felt she must be dreaming. Not only had the thief charged two thousand dollars to her account, but the store manager seemed to believe that Nancy herself had made the purchases.

"I must have a double!" she thought. "Doris Drake's friend Phyl was right in thinking she was talking to me. Someone is impersonating me! It's possible this person or a friend of hers broke into our house, took the charge plate, and some of my clothes for her to wear!"

Outwardly, Nancy tried to appear calm. "I couldn't have bought those things, Mr. Goldsmith," she insisted. "This is the first time today I've been in Burk's."

For answer, the manager pressed a buzzer. Three women entered. He introduced them as Mrs. Reilly, Miss Coogan, and Mrs. Watson,

"Mrs. Reilly sold you the watch," said Mr. Goldsmith. "From Miss Coogan you bought an expensive mink stole. Next, you purchased two high-priced dresses in Mrs. Watson's department. Ladies, do you identify this girl?"

The saleswomen nodded. Each one identified her as Nancy Drew, the young woman she had waited on, and who had signed sales slips for each purchase.

"This is preposterous!" Nancy cried, her blue eyes flashing. "Someone is impersonating me. She stole my charge plate. I want to see those sales slips."

Just then, to Nancy's relief, Chief McGinnis entered the office. He and the Drews were old friends, and he greeted Nancy cordially.

Mr. Goldsmith spoke up. "Glad you're here, Chief. I was just going to call you." He explained what had happened.

The police officer replied calmly, "If Nancy Drew says she didn't buy anything, she didn't. Let's get down to facts, Mr. Goldsmith. I'm here to help Miss Drew, and Burk's also."

The chief quizzed the salesclerks briefly. After hearing their stories, he said gravely, "Nancy, I'm afraid this young woman who resembles you so closely—and forged your signature on the sales slips—may continue to take advantage of it."

Nancy smiled ruefully. "I realize that." She was more convinced of this than ever when the sales slips were brought to the office. The forgery was excellent. Nancy's impersonator must have carefully practiced the signature on the charge plate.

Mr. Goldsmith sighed wearily. "I'm sorry, Miss Drew, about this whole matter, and that I suspected you of dishonesty."

"That's all right," she replied. "The main thing is to track down the culprit and get back your stolen property."

She asked the clerks what her "twin" had been wearing. "It was a lovely light-blue dress," replied Mrs. Reilly. "Printed silk, with white flowers."

Nancy gasped. "I have a dress like that. And I don't remember seeing it in my closet today."

"The woman no doubt took it," the police chief said, frowning. "Nancy, be very careful. This impersonation may mean not only annoyance, but possible danger for you."

Mr. Goldsmith promised that Burk's private detective and all the store's sales personnel would be on the lookout for Nancy's unknown double.

As the young sleuth left the store with Chief McGinnis, she said to him, "I wonder if this

person actually is my double or is only cleverly made up to resemble me."

The officer frowned. "If it's the latter, the thief will be harder to catch. She may not pose as Nancy Drew again for some time. But I'll have my men start working on the case from every possible angle." He admitted that no clues to the thief at the Drew home had been found. "I'll post a twenty-four-hour guard at your home."

"Good," Nancy said. "Hannah will feel much better, since I have to return to Lilac Inn this afternoon, and Dad's away."

Nancy said good-by to the chief and hurried across the street to the employment agency. She wondered if by chance Maud Potter might still be there. But when Nancy entered the office, the only person there was the woman manager, seated at a desk.

"Can I help you?" she asked Nancy.

"I'm here at the request of the new owners of Lilac Inn," Nancy replied. "Has anyone else been in to ask about a waitress to work out there?"

"No."

As Nancy asked her next question, she was thinking, "Why was Maud in here?" Aloud she said, "Have you any waitresses on your list?"

"Not at present. We'll call you if any apply."

On impulse, Nancy asked her, "Could you tell me if you've ever had a Miss Mary Mason on your waitress list?"

The woman opened a nearby file and flipped through a folder. "No, we haven't."

Nancy thanked the manager and left the agency. When she arrived home and told Hannah the latest developments, the housekeeper was more upset than ever.

"I feet in my bones that this impersonator is up to something sinister," she declared. "I wish your dad were home."

"You'll be safe here, Hannah," Nancy said assuringly, and told Mrs. Gruen that a policeman would be assigned to guard the house. "And speaking of Dad, I'm going to call him right now and ask him if he took that picture of me with him."

"While you do that, I'll fix some lunch for us," Mrs. Gruen offered. "You must be starved. It's two o'clock."

Nancy went to the hall telephone and a minute later was requesting the switchboard operator at the Cleveland hotel to ring Mr. Drew's room.

"Hello?" came the lawyer's deep, resonant voice.

"Hi, Dad! How good to hear you!" Nancy said happily.

She gave him an account of the burglary and succeeding events. Carson Drew was greatly concerned. "Nancy," he added in a troubled voice, "I didn't bring your photograph with me. Your double must have taken it. She has already fooled four persons who don't know you well. With the help of the picture, she may try something bolder," he stated.

"You think this girl has some ulterior motive. other than faking my charge account, don't you, Dad?"

"I'm afraid so. Be on your guard, Nancy. Try to stay with a group as much as possible, particularly after you return to Lilac Inn."

The lawyer added that he would be home the next day. "I'll look into the whole affair then."

Nancy promised to be careful and said good-by. She and Hannah sat down and ate lunch. Finally Nancy said she had to pack and leave.

"But first I'm going to try locating that waitress Mary Mason." Nancy picked up the telephone directory and thumbed through it until she reached the *M's.* She called two families named Mason, but each denied having a relative Mary.

"Probably," Nancy surmised, "Mary did not live in this area."

Deep in thought she went upstairs and took a suitcase from her closet. Nancy quickly placed additional garments in it, then gathered up her skin-diving equipment: green rubber fins, a diving mask, and an aqualung. Finally, Nancy packed a rubber suit which would insulate her body against the cold river water, and an underwater camera her father had given her.

Nancy kissed Hannah good-by and got into her convertible. She drove to the Comings' home and picked up Helen's suitcase, then set out for Lilac Inn.

Her thoughts revolved around the mystery out there and also on the problem of her impersonator. "No one could look enough like me to be absolutely identical. Why, even identical twins have distinguishing characteristics," she told herself with a smile, "such as the shape of fingernails, voice tones, and facial expressions."

The late-afternoon traffic on the highway to Benton was becoming heavy. Nancy turned from the main road onto a very narrow, less-used one. Presently, in her mirror, she saw a red panel truck behind her coming along at an alarming speed. Nancy, at the same time, noted an arrow indicating a sharp curve ahead. She braked and motioned the truck driver to slow down.

Either he did not see her signal, or was ignoring it. Instead of slowing down, the truck's speed increased, as if to pass her. The curve was not wide enough for two cars to go side by side. On Nancy's right was a deep ditch, filled with water.

She had no choice but to start around the curve. To her horror, the other vehicle was already edging around her left fender. Nancy glimpsed a chrome eagle ornament on the truck's hood.

A split second later her convertible was forced over into the ditch!

CHAPTER V

Blackout!

As NANCY'S convertible leaned precariously, its right wheels in the ditch, the panel truck roared on around the bend and out of sight. Nancy braked her car to a stop, thankful it had not turned over.

"That driver ought to have his license revoked!" she thought indignantly. She knew it would be difficult to get out of the muddy ditch. "Well, I'll have a try," she decided. "Here goes!"

She tried to rock the car gently back and forth to gain momentum. The right tires spun crazily and sank lower into the mire.

Nancy tried again. No use. She feared it might be some time before a car would come along in this deserted area. Finally she decided to search for some objects to force under the right wheels for traction.

Just then, Nancy heard an automobile approaching. "Thank goodness!" she murmured a moment later. "A State Police car."

It drew up and parked at the side of the road. A young officer hopped out.

"Having trouble, miss?" he asked. "Lieutenant Brice, Benton State Police Barracks," he said pleasantly.

Nancy introduced herself, then explained. He asked if she had noted the truck's license plates. "No," she replied, but described the truck and the chrome eagle ornament on its hood.

Lieutenant Brice said that if he found the truck, he would see that the driver was brought to court,

"I have a tow chain in my car. I'll try to pull you out. Keep the engine in gear."

Five minutes later the convertible was out of the ditch. Nancy thanked the trooper for his help, then drove off.

It was almost six o'clock when Nancy pulled into the Lilac Inn parking lot. She went at once to the patio, where the Willoughbys, Maud, Helen, and John were gathered.

"I'm glad you could return in time for supper, Nancy," said Mrs. Willoughby.

The others plied the girl detective with questions about the Drews' burglar. Nancy gave an account of her day's experiences, concluding with the reckless truck driver.

"Why, how terrible!" Emily exclaimed.

"The nerve of someone impersonating you!" Helen bristled.

Nancy smiled wryly. "I'd certainly like to know what the girl's purpose is."

Abruptly, Maud changed the subject. To Emily she said, "I dropped into the Empire Employment Agency this morning. A waitress walked in to apply, so I told her to report here tomorrow for an interview. Her name is Jean Holmes."

"But I asked—" Emily broke off when Nancy gave her a warning look.

Maud evidently did not notice this, and added sweetly, "I knew another waitress was needed here. I just wanted to make myself useful."

"I see. Thank you," Emily said coolly.

Later, after Maud had excused herself to dress for supper, Emily burst out, "Maud makes me

so angry! Why doesn't she tend to her own job!"

"Don't pick on her, dear!" Mrs. Willoughby retorted. "She's had a hard enough time lately." Rising, Emily's aunt said she wanted to confer with Mr. Daly and went off.

The four young people were left alone. Nancy asked Emily how Maud had been chosen as social director for Lilac Inn.

"Aunt Hazel asked us to," Emily replied. In a whisper she added, "I wish Maud would concentrate more on our recreational program. Nancy, why did you give me the high-sign?"

Nancy told of having seen Maud enter the agency, and of being informed by the manager later that no one had inquired about a waitress.

Emily sighed. "I'll be so glad when Dick gets back. Especially if any more strange things happen around here."

"Emily, you've nothing to worry about," John declared. "Everything will be fine."

The young man stood up, saying he had a supper engagement in town. "Sorry I'll miss the festivities, Emily. I'll see your glittering gems later."

Emily, her face brightening, explained to Nancy that her aunt had planned a festive meal that evening. "To celebrate my receiving the diamonds."

"That'll be fun," Nancy said. "Helen, let's go now and change our clothes."

The two girls took the suitcases from Nancy's convertible. As they unpacked in the cottage and dressed, Helen discussed Nancy's impersonator.

"It's positively creepy, Nancy," she said worriedly. "Your double doesn't sound like an ordinary thief."

The girls quickly finished dressing. Nancy had put on a pink sheath dress and pumps. Helen wore an aqua organdy. They went to the patio where Emily joined them a minute later. She said that Jean Holmes, the waitress, had arrived unexpectedly for her interview. The girl had explained that she had heard of a second position, and wanted to make a decision immediately.

"Jean seems quite satisfactory," Emily stated. "She'll move in here tomorrow and start work."

Maud Potter joined the girls. "I'm so glad you approve my choice, Emily," she said ingratiatingly. "Now, let's have supper and see your diamonds."

Emily led the group to a small private dining room which opened off the larger room and overlooked a garden. They said good evening to Mr. Daly who stood just outside the connecting door.

Mrs. Willoughby was waiting for them near an open window and greeted Emily with a "Happy Birthday in advance, dear!"

"Oh, thank you, Aunt Hazel. Everything looks divine!"

All the girls admired the table, set with gleaming silver, a creamy lace cloth, and a beautiful birthday cake surrounded by red roses for a centerpiece. Soft light from colonial wall fixtures completed the picture, as shadows danced on the old paneled walls.

Emily's aunt beamed. "I want everything to be perfect tonight," she said.

Mrs. Willoughby sat at one end of the table, her back to the open windows, Emily opposite her. By the time the main course was finished, it was almost dark outside. Then the candles were lighted on the cake and everyone joined in singing "Happy Birthday" as Emily blew out the candles.

After dessert, Mrs. Willoughby asked Mr. Daly to close the door to the private dining room. The elderly man nodded understandingly and shut the door.

Nancy realized what the sale of the diamonds would mean to Lilac Inn

Mrs. Willoughby withdrew a white velvet jewel Case from her handbag. Getting up, she went to place it on the table before Emily, then returned to her chair. With a smile she said:

"This is a wonderful moment for you, Emily dear—the inheritance from your mother. I only hope these gems will bring you happiness."

Nancy noticed that Emily's hands trembled slightly as she opened the case. Everyone gasped. Against the white satin lining were the twenty diamonds which glowed and flashed.

"Oh!" Emily exclaimed. "Aren't they beautifull" She set the box on the table.

Maud stared in fascination, and Nancy and Helen expressed their delight at Emily's good fortune. Nancy realized what the sale of these gems would mean in financial assistance to

Lilac Inn.

Emily arose and gave her aunt a hug and kiss. “Oh, Aunt Hazel, you’re a love. I’m sure Mother would understand my wanting to use the gems for my future and Dick’s.”

Suddenly the group was startled by a clattering crash from the adjoining dining room. Simultaneously, the lights went out. Nancy hurriedly rose and flicked the wall switch back and forth, but the room remained dark.

“Mr. Daly,” called Emily, opening the door, “will you please check the fuse box in the cellar ?”

“I will,” he replied. “I think a main circuit’s blown—all our lights are out.”

“Oh, dear,” fretted Mrs. Willoughby. “What a trying bother!”

“Yes. These old buildings are so undependable,” Maud said crossly. “Something’s always breaking down.”

“This can happen in a modern one, too,” Nancy said in defense of Lilac Inn. Maud merely sniffed in annoyance.

To everyone’s relief, John was heard shouting from the garden, “Hold everything! I’ll be right in!”

But as John stepped through the open window, the lights came on again. The next instant Emily, returning to her chair, gave a horrified cry.

“My diamonds! They’re gone!”

The others gasped in disbelief. Hazel Willoughby, ash-white, stared at the place on the table where the velvet case had rested. Then she pitched forward in a faint.

“Oh!” Emily sobbed fearfully.

“Your aunt will be all right,” said Nancy, who had jumped up. Quickly she and Helen dampened napkins with ice water from the tumblers and applied these to the woman’s head and wrists. In a few seconds Mrs. Willoughby revived.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized weakly. “Such an awful shock—the diamonds vanishing into thin air.”

Emily insisted that her aunt go to her room and lie down.

“I’ll be all right, dear. Really. What do we do now?” Mrs. Willoughby looked around helplessly.

“We’d better keep this to ourselves,” John said. “Otherwise, dinner guests will be upset. I’ll check outside for prowlers. However, the thief didn’t go out this window.”

Nancy decided to do some sleuthing for the thief in the building and hurried into the main dining room. The only guests were two elderly women, waiting to pay their bill. Nancy learned from them that the waitress Anna had accidentally dropped a tray, which caused the clattering noise just before the lights went out. The ladies were sure that no one else but Mr. Daly had been in the room at the time.

Nancy next went into the kitchen, where the cooks and waitresses were cleaning up after the evening meal. The girl detective asked where each of them had been when the inn was plunged into darkness. All the women except Anna replied that they had been in the kitchen.

Anna gave Nancy a curious look. “Why do you ask?”

The young detective explained that Emily Willoughby wanted to be sure no one had been hurt by an unexpected fall during the blackout.

Nancy left the kitchen and hurriedly went through the other first-floor rooms, but saw no one. As she walked back toward the private dining room, Nancy met Mr. Daly in the lobby. He told her that he had found nothing wrong with the lighting system.

“I can’t understand what happened,” he said, then added, “I just heard from Emily about the missing jewels. How dreadfull”

John came in at that moment and said he had found no prowler on the grounds. “By this

time the jewel thief is undoubtedly far away," he concluded.

As Nancy returned with him to the private dining room, she was deep in thought. Logically, the only ones who could have taken the diamonds were she and her four dining companions! "But that's absolutely unlikely," Nancy told herself. She reported her findings to the others.

Maud Potter's eyes narrowed. "I suppose you think Emily should search us!" she said nastily to Nancy.

"Maud!" Emily protested. "Nancy meant no such thing."

Maud paid no attention, but turned on Mrs. Willoughby, who was still pale. "You can blame yourself, Hazel—announcing in a public dining room this morning that you were going to get Emily's diamonds!"

"I know." Mrs. Willoughby sighed. But Emily put a comforting arm around her, and gave Maud a look of disapproval.

"Let's all search this room," Nancy proposed quickly. "We might find some clue."

Everyone but Maud readily agreed. She sat sullen-faced, while the others looked carefully in corners and under tables and chairs.

Nancy herself was scrutinizing the area where Emily had sat. Suddenly her keen eyes spotted three tiny pale-purple lilac buds on the floor. One —two—three—she counted, then saw a fourth bud lying near the wall to the right of Emily's chair. Aside from the centerpiece, there were no other flowers in the room.

"How did lilac buds get in here?" Nancy mused. There was no sign of footprints near them.

Saying nothing, Nancy picked one up. It was fresh. She looked at the wall thoughtfully and closely.

Everyone watched in amazement as the titian-blond girl began to tap the wall, then listen intently.

Nancy motioned them not to say a word. She continued tapping, until she tried one spot which sounded different. It had a hollow ring. Nancy pressed against the wooden wall. Suddenly a panel slid aside noiselessly.

CHAPTER VI

Uncanny Recoveries

JOHN and the others gaped in astonishment as the panel in the wall slid open. “Nancy, you’re terrific!” John exclaimed, handing her his flashlight.

Everyone crowded behind Nancy, as she beamed the light into a wood-walled closet. It had a musty odor.

“I don’t remember seeing this in the floor plans of the inn,” Emily said, puzzled, as Nancy stooped and shone the flash on something on the floor. It was a crushed, but still fresh lilac flower!

“It was those other blossoms which made me think there might be a concealed entrance into this room.”

“Nancy, you’re a genius,” said Mrs. Willoughby. “I never dreamed this spot was here. The thief must have been hiding in the closet.”

“But where did he go?” John asked.

Nancy was feeling the rear wall of the closet. Her fingers touched a small metal latch. She turned it. A second panel slid open soundlessly. Beyond was the coat closet off the lobby of the inn!

“This must be how the jewel thief got in and out of this dining room,” Nancy announced. She walked on into the lobby, followed by the others.

“Look!” Helen exclaimed, and pointed to a lilac bud near the front door.

Nancy examined the bud which proved to be fresh and moist. “The thief probably wore a sprig of lilacs. That makes me think the person was a woman.”

Mr. Daly agreed with Nancy. He admitted that he had not known of the hidden closet, and was perplexed as to who could have learned of it.

“These panel openings must have fallen into disuse before I purchased the inn,” he remarked.

“One thing’s certain,” said Nancy. “The thief not only has an intimate knowledge of the original floor plan of Lilac Inn but also knew two other things: that Emily was to receive her diamonds tonight, and where Mrs. Willoughby was to present them.”

“Too bad I didn’t get back sooner tonight,” said John, frowning. “I might have met the thief. Incidentally, she must have had an accomplice to work the lighting system.”

“But how could they communicate at just the right moment if one of them was in the cellar?” Helen asked.

“I can answer that,” said Mr. Daly. “The panel board for the light control is directly under that private dining room. The floor is worn so thin that conversation upstairs can be heard down there.”

Nancy nodded. “After the person in the cellar was sure the thief was hidden again, he or she turned on the lights to make the whole thing look like a temporary outside power failure.”

“What shall we do now?” Maud asked nervously.

“Call the police immediately,” Nancy advised.

“No!” Emily cried out.

Everyone looked at her in surprise. Emily flushed, but remained adamant.

"If people hear we've had a robbery," she argued, "it may discourage them from coming to Lilac Inn. Calling in the police will mean newspaper publicity. Dick and I have worked too hard to risk it."

"It will be a shame if you don't recover the diamonds," Helen spoke up. "But if you report the theft, at least you can collect the insurance, Emily, and use that money for the inn as you planned."

At this remark Mrs. Willoughby's face again turned ash-white and the others thought she was about to faint again. "Insurance. Insurance," she said hoarsely. "There isn't any! I thought the jewels were safe in the bank vault and let the insurance policy lapse!"

Everyone listening was stunned and tears came to Emily's eyes. She turned to Nancy and asked in a trembling voice, "What shall I do?"

It was Helen who spoke up. "Have Nancy take over the case of your missing diamonds, Emily. I guarantee she'll unearth them!"

All the others backed Helen's suggestion eagerly except Maud. The social director merely raised her eyebrows.

The amateur sleuth smiled. "I'll be glad to do what I can, Emily, but this is a big assignment. If I don't succeed very soon, will you promise to notify the police?"

"It's a bargain, Nancy."

John whistled. "Miss Nancy Drew, detective, you're not going to have much time for skin diving."

Nancy laughed. "I'll find time."

John cautioned the Willoughbys to make sure all first-floor doors and windows were kept locked at night. He himself went outside to make another tour of the grounds. Emily reassured her unhappy aunt and persuaded her to go to bed. Maud said she would follow.

The three girls decided to check the window and door locks in the various rooms. Emily took the kitchen and offices, while Nancy and Helen headed for the other rooms. Minutes later they met in the lobby to report everything locked.

Helen gave a huge sigh. "Nancy, aren't you exhausted after all this excitement?"

Nancy admitted that she was a bit tired. "Two burglaries in one day and a car mishap are quite enough." She smiled wearily. "Helen, what's your theory about the theft of Emily's diamonds?"

The dark-haired girl hesitated. "I'm sure it's an outside job but—"

"Out with it, Miss Corning," Nancy urged. "Whom do you suspect?"

"John McBride!" her friend blurted. "I like him very much, but he was away most of today. Yet Emily said he was here to help fix up the inn during Dick's absence."

"Yes, she did," Nancy admitted. "But I can't believe John has anything to do with either the theft or the mysterious happenings at Lilac Inn."

The young sleuth's eyes had been roving back and forth across the floor, since it was instinctive with her to be hunting for clues whenever a mystery confronted her. Something glinted in a corner under a chair. She went to pick it up as Emily came into the lobby.

"What is it?" Emily asked.

"Believe it or not, it's my stolen charge plate!" Nancy answered. "I may be jumping to conclusions, but I'm sure now that my impersonator is the jewel thief. She dropped the charge plate from her pocket or purse, probably when she put the jewel case in it."

"This is positively eerie," Helen remarked. "Maybe that fake Nancy dropped something else."

The girls started a search and presently Helen found a tiny envelope, farther under the chair. Nancy's name and address were typed on it!

“The charge plate must have been in this and slid out,” she said. “My impersonator must have decided to type the envelope to be sure that she did not make a mistake when the clerks at Burk’s Department Store asked for her address for the sales slips. I notice the letter *a* is faint.”

Suddenly Nancy chuckled. “Em, you didn’t want the police notified about the jewel theft, but here’s a chance to get police help without telling them.”

“How?”

“Chief McGinnis knows that my charge plate was stolen by an impersonator,” Nancy answered. “With this typed clue, maybe he can find her. And I suspect that when he does, *your* thief will be caught!”

Nancy called Chief McGinnis at his home. She told him about the charge plate and envelope, and her suspicion that her impersonator, though not known to the inn’s owners, must have been there.

“Please send the plate and envelope to me for fingerprint analysis,” Chief McGinnis requested.

Nancy promised she would and hung up, wishing she could have reported the jewel theft to him. It was after eleven o’clock when Helen and Nancy said good night to Emily and walked to their cottage. Both girls fell asleep almost as soon as their heads touched the pillows. But around three in the morning, Nancy was partially awakened by a noise.

“What was that?” she thought, looking around the cottage with sleepy eyes. She listened. But all was silent now. Finally Nancy went back to sleep.

She awoke at seven. Helen was still asleep. Nancy put on a casual sweater and skirt and loafers. She tiptoed from the cabin and headed for the inn. No one else seemed to be outside.

For the next half hour Nancy looked near the front door for footprints, lilac buds, or anything else to give her a clue to the jewel thief. She found nothing.

She strolled around back and met Hank, the gardener, who greeted her pleasantly and said he had decided not to give up his job. “My injured leg’s better. But I have other worries now,” he said. “Some outdoor equipment was taken last night from the tool shed.”

“Really?” said Nancy. “What?”

Hank led her to the small wooden structure used by the outdoor workers. “We’re missing several shovels, rakes, some wire, and small parts,” said Hank. “But worst of all, an expensive jig saw that Mr. Farnham just bought is gone.”

“More thefts,” thought Nancy. Aloud she asked, “Is the shed locked at night?”

Hank said it was, and that he was responsible for securing the shed after work. “Probably none of the other men thought to ask Miss Willoughby for the spare key to lock up when I wasn’t here.”

Nancy examined the soft dirt outside the shed. There were a number of footprints, all blurred and leading in different directions. As Jim, Gil, and Luke—the three other gardeners—reported for work, Nancy questioned each of them in turn. They confessed that they had forgotten to lock the shed, and said they had no idea who might have taken the tools. Before Nancy left the men, she suggested that Hank search the grounds once more before reporting the theft.

As Nancy started up the front porch steps of the inn a few minutes later, she was hailed by John McBride. “Look what I found!” he cried triumphantly.

He held out Emily’s white velvet jewel case!

CHAPTER VII

A Diver in Peril

"JOHN, you found the diamonds!" Nancy exclaimed.

The young man opened the case and displayed its contents. The twenty diamonds, of various sizes, glinted in the morning sunlight.

"Astounding, isn't it?" John grinned, adding that he had found the case under one of the lobby windows. "I must have missed it last night."

"Will you show me the spot, please? I must have missed it too."

John led Nancy to a clump of China-blue lilac bushes, and pointed out the place where he had found the case.

"The thief must have dropped this, but I can't figure out why she didn't come back for it," John remarked.

"She may not have known until later that she had dropped it. By that time she probably was afraid of being caught," Nancy replied.

Just then Emily came outside. She was beside herself with joy upon seeing the jewels.

"John, you're a darling!" she cried. "Let's go to the patio and tell the others."

"Isn't this wonderful?" Mrs. Willoughby exclaimed. "And none of the diamonds is missing!" she added, counting.

"Are you sure?" Maud gave John and Nancy suspicious looks.

Nancy was about to make a sharp retort but refrained. The social director seemed determined to be unpleasant, and the young sleuth decided to ignore her insinuating remark. John just looked amused.

"Aunt Hazel," said Emily, "I think these jewels should be put in a safe place at once. Since I'm going to sell them, I think our jeweler friend in Benton, Mr. Fabian, is the person to keep them. And he can also make a new appraisal of the diamonds."

Emily's aunt nodded. "I'm so happy for you, dear."

Emily continued, "I might sell a few of the smaller diamonds today. We need cash immediately to take care of some outstanding bills."

Just then, Hank walked up to the group to tell Emily of the disappearance of the tools. The gardener asserted that he had conducted a thorough search.

An interested expression came over John's face and he said, "I'll search." Nancy wondered if anything unusual lay back of his offer.

Everyone went inside to breakfast. When the meal was finished, Mrs. Willoughby said to Emily, "I'd ride in to town with you, but I have a headache."

Emily insisted that her aunt rest. "Nancy and Helen will go with me, I'm sure."

The girls said they would be happy to. At once Maud asked if she might join the group. "All right," Emily said without enthusiasm.

Before they left, Nancy telephoned Hannah Gruen, reporting the loss and recovery of the diamonds and the finding of the charge plate. She chuckled. "Actually I'm out of a sleuthing job, Hannah, so I'll see you soon."

"But you haven't found out who your impersonator is," the housekeeper said. "She may

keep on making trouble for you."

"You're right. I must find her. Now tell me about yourself."

The Drews' housekeeper reported an uneventful night and that a police guard was still posted at the house. "Your father wired he would be detained until tomorrow evening."

"Well, I'll be seeing you. 'Bye now."

On the ride to Benton, Nancy and Emily decided it was best not to mention to the jeweler the disappearance of her diamonds the previous night. "Even though I have them back, exaggerated stories might still get around."

When the group entered Fabian's Jewelry Store, Emily asked to see the owner. The pleasant-faced man greeted her cordially and was introduced to the other girls. Then Emily opened her jewel case.

"My, what a lovely collection of stones!" Mr. Fabian exclaimed.

He picked up a small diamond and studied it closely. Frowning, he put on his jeweler's eyepiece, examined the gem, then dropped it into the case. Diamond after diamond was scrutinized in this manner. Emily watched anxiously.

When Mr. Fabian put down the last gem he looked hard at Emily. "Is this a practical joke?" he asked. "These stones are only glass!"

Emily's face blanched. Helen and Maud were speechless.

Nancy was dismayed. Had the thief planted fake stones for some sinister purpose? "What is it?" she asked herself.

The jeweler was saying, "These are excellent imitations, Emily. Where did they come from?"

"Why—er—they were my mother's. I always thought they were real."

"I'm sorry," The jeweler smiled sympathetically, as he handed the case to Emily. Almost in a daze, she thanked him and the others followed her from the shop.

As they stood outside the store, Nancy and Helen tried to comfort their friend. "It's a shame," Helen said.

"It ... it's the jinx again ..." Emily sobbed. "I should have known. Oh, poor Dick! All our plans are spoiled."

"I'm not so sure," Nancy said. "I have a feeling the thief substituted these fakes for the real diamonds. I know it sounds funny ..."

"Huh!" Maud exclaimed. Turning to Nancy, she said, "An awful lot of funny things have happened since you came to Lilac Inn."

"That's enough, Maud!" Emily brushed away her tears. "I won't have you insulting my friends. Anyway, maybe Nancy's right."

"Oh, I forgot. Nancy's a famous detective!" Maud said sarcastically.

Helen and Nancy kept still with difficulty. Nancy wondered why Maud had become so antagonistic toward her.

In silence, the four reached Nancy's car. As the others got in, Nancy stopped a newsboy to buy a River Heights morning paper. Nancy opened her change purse. Simultaneously, a woman coming from the opposite direction jostled Nancy's arm.

The purse dropped to the pavement, scattering change in every direction.

"Oh, bother!" Nancy exclaimed.

Emily jumped out of the car to help retrieve the money. A moment later she gave a startled cry and pointed to the ground.

Lying beside the ten-cent piece was a small diamond brilliantly reflecting the sunlight!

The expression on Nancy's face brought Helen and Maud hurrying from the car. Emily picked up the diamond.

"Is this yours, Nancy?" she asked.

"N—no, I never saw it before," Nancy stammered, completely astounded.

Maud looked smug. "Try and make anyone believe that. It's one of your diamonds, Emily!"

Nancy was too horrified to speak. Helen came to her friend's defense. Glaring at Maud, she dedared, "If Nancy says she knows nothing about how the diamond got in her change purse, it's true!"

"Of course it is," Emily backed her up. "Oh Maud, why are you always so hateful?" Turning to Nancy, she said, "Someone has tried to throw suspicion on you. But why?"

"I don't know," Nancy replied. "If that's the case, I wonder if that woman who bumped me might be in league with the jewel thief." To herself she added, "Maybe my impersonator is trying to throw suspicion on me!"

She paid the boy for the paper, then asked him and the others if they had noticed the woman. Unfortunately none of them had.

Nancy suggested that they have the new-found stone appraised, so the group re-entered Fabian's. The jeweler was surprised but obligingly put on his eyepiece.

"This is a perfect one-carat diamond!" he exclaimed. "If you're interested in selling, I'll be happy to make an offer."

"Not today, but I may be back." Emily smiled.

She and her friends returned to the convertible and Nancy headed for Lilac Inn. She speculated to herself on the imitation gems. "The thief learned the number and shapes of Emily's diamonds, and had the artificial ones made to match as closely as possible. Very clever."

Her thoughts were broken into by Maud asking Emily, "When are you going to tell Dick about the theft of your jewels?"

"When I get ready," was the cool reply.

As they turned into the Lilac Inn driveway, Emily sighed. "Aunt Hazel will be dreadfully upset to hear about the substitution of the gems."

"It'll put her to bed for a week," Maud prophesied unfeelingly. "Well, I'll see you all at lunch."

The noon meal was a rather uncomfortable one. Mrs. Willoughby was obviously dejected and ate little. Maud maintained an almost sulky silence. Nancy was preoccupied, though somewhat disappointed that John was not present. Also, a startling idea had come to her about the diamond in her purse: The noise which had awakened her during the night might have been made by an intruder leaving, perhaps by the bathroom window, after planting the diamond.

After luncheon Anna the waitress beckoned Nancy aside and handed her a note. "I just took this message from Mr. McBride on the phone. I was passing the desk and answered the ring."

Nancy thanked the girl and read the message. "Nancy: I've found an important clue to the case. Come in your canoe to the dock where you saw the man with the crew cut. Wear your diving gear."

Nancy was intrigued. What was John's discovery? What kind of clue would necessitate underwater equipment?

Since Maud was there, Nancy merely told the others she had a date with John, saying, "Dad warned me not to go anywhere alone, but if John's with me, I'll be safe." Nancy then hurried to put on her bathing suit. Over this she slipped her rubber insulation suit. Then, carrying mask, aqualung, flippers, and an underwater camera on a strap around her neck, she went to the dock.

Soon Nancy was paddling her canoe down the river, scanning the shore ahead for the place near which she and Helen had capsized. She finally sighted the dock where Helen had seen the man in the rowboat. On the bank nearby was a blue canoe with *Lilac Inn* painted on its side.

"John!" called Nancy, looking about. No answer. Again Nancy called his name. Silence.

A little distance beyond the dock the girl noticed a man fishing from the beach. He wore a wide-brimmed straw hat. Cupping her hands, Nancy called out and asked if he had seen the young man who had come in the canoe.

"Yeah," the fisherman yelled in a nasal voice. "He went underwater a couple of minutes ago —dived into the middle of the river opposite his canoe."

"Thanks." Nancy was mystified. Why hadn't John waited for her to arrive? He knew it was dangerous for anyone to go skin diving alone.

Hurriedly she beached her own craft, donned her mask and aqualung, and slipped on the flippers. Then she swam out to the middle of the river.

She made a quick dive to begin her descent. As she straightened out, Nancy kicked with her fins and propelled herself with her arms. The water became darker and cooler as she descended. Small fish flitted by. Presently Nancy realized she was nearing the bottom. She estimated that the river was about twenty feet deep at this spot.

When she reached the muddy floor, she glanced about in every direction. There was no sign of John—only underwater plants and several large rocks.

Nancy swam cautiously and watched for crevices as she went forward. Every moment she expected to see John. Had he been underwater long? Had he met with a freak accident and been hurt? Even an expert skin diver can overestimate his physical abilities, she realized.

All of a sudden Nancy stopped abruptly. Her eyes widened and a chill went up her spine. Protruding from a massive rocky overhang was something that resembled a shark's head!

"It can't be!" she gasped inwardly. "Sharks don't live in fresh water!"

The sinister shape, however, was far too large to be an ordinary fish. Nancy's fear gave way to curiosity, as the object remained stationary. She inched forward, holding the camera in front of her and cocking the shutter. Three more strokes and she would have a good view of the mysterious form.

One—two—Nancy was about to shoot, when a slight movement in the water caused her to whirl around. A spear came hurtling from behind a big rock to Nancy's right. The next moment the tip of the spear lodged in the lens of her camera!

CHAPTER VIII

A Hoax Revealed

NANCY'S heart thumped wildly as the spear quivered in her camera. Someone had tried to injure her! Why?

The girl detective's first instinct was to avoid further danger and rise to the surface as quickly as possible. But she paused to look around for the spear thrower. There was no sign of him.

"He may be getting ready for another attack, though," she thought. "I'd better not take a chance."

Gripping the camera, with the embedded spear, in both hands, she swam upward. At the surface, Nancy set out for shore and climbed to the dock. She glanced about for the fisherman, but he was not there.

Nancy removed her skin-diving gear, then examined the stainless-steel spear. It was the simplest type used for underwater fishing. The weapon was six feet long, with a sharp, thin tip. Nancy shuddered as she pulled it from the lens of her camera.

"I'd better go back to the inn," she thought. "Dad was right about it being dangerous for me to be alone."

Nancy had been preoccupied with her narrow escape. Now she suddenly remembered John. To her astonishment, the Lilac Inn canoe was gone. Had John surfaced while Nancy was underwater, and, not seeing her, returned to the inn? Also, she wondered whether John was the skin diver seen by the fisherman on the river.

Nancy's head whirled with theories as she pushed her canoe into the water and stepped into it. Recalling the strange, sharklike object, she thought, "Perhaps the spear thrower didn't want me to photograph the object? And was that what John meant about a clue?"

As Nancy tied up at the inn dock, she saw that the blue canoe was there. "Well, anyway, he's back."

As the young sleuth headed for her cottage, she heard Helen call. Nancy stopped, and Helen, Emily, and Mrs. Willoughby hurried forward. They stared aghast at the spear in Nancy's hand.

"N-Nancy! You've been in danger!" Helen gasped.

Nancy gave a wry smile. Just then John McBride, dressed in slacks and sports shirt, hurried toward the group.

Before Nancy had a chance to question him, John exclaimed, "Fine thing, Nancy Drew! Standing me up to go skin diving!"

"Standing you up?" Nancy retorted. "Where were you?"

"In the apple orchard," John replied. "Waiting for you, where I said I'd be."

Nancy shook her head. "There's been a horrible mix-up. I'll tell my story first."

When she had finished, John and the others expressed amazement and concern.

"Nancy," the young man said, "I didn't phone any message to you. Someone else did, apparently to keep you from seeing me in the orchard."

"What's all this about the orchard?" Nancy demanded.

John reminded her that at eleven o'clock she had hailed him from the patio. "I had just

returned after failing to find the missing tools. You were wearing the pink dress you had on the night before. You said you had something to discuss with me, and asked if I would meet you at twelve-thirty in the apple orchard. I said I'd be glad to."

"Why, I was in Benton at eleven o'clock!" Nancy exclaimed. "I wasn't the girl you talked to!"

John looked dumfounded. "But the girl sounded and looked exactly like you." He added that he had taken a sandwich with him to the orchard, but left at one-thirty, deciding that Nancy had changed her mind.

Emily caught her breath. "Oh, Nancy! It must have been the girl who is impersonating you!"

John nodded somberly. "I'm afraid so. I sure was fooled. And someone wanted to get you away from here and even harm you, perhaps fatally!"

Helen looked distressed, and Mrs. Willoughby wrung her hands. "We must report all this to the police immediately. No one at Lilac Inn is safe."

Emily, though concerned, still held back. "Please—not until Dick gets home tomorrow. In the meantime, Nancy may solve the mystery."

Her aunt reluctantly agreed. Nancy had been silent, trying to fit the various elements of the puzzle together. It was evident to her that her "twin" had firsthand knowledge as to where she and others at the inn would be at certain times. Nancy was certain the girl's actions further indicated accomplices, and dangerous ones at that, judging from the spear thrower. Offhand, Nancy could not imagine anyone at the inn being involved in such scheming, not even Maud.

"Has anything else been stolen?" she asked abruptly.

"I haven't heard of any losses," Emily replied.

"What's the next move, Detective Drew?" Helen spoke up.

"I'm not sure," Nancy replied thoughtfully. "But I do agree, for the time being, it would be best not to have the police investigate either the river or the inn. Since our enemies apparently want me out of the way, it must mean they want to stay here. Let's hope we can catch them before they decide to leave!"

John changed the subject. "I'd like to investigate the place in the river where you saw that 'shark,' Nancy. Also, I'll try to find out who used the inn's canoe. See you later."

Nancy returned to her cottage. She put away the skin-diving gear and set the spear in the closet.

"I'd better hang on to this for evidence, even though there probably aren't any fingerprints on it except mine."

She took out her pink dress. It looked crisp and fresh.

"My impersonator sure is a quick-change artist," Nancy thought. "She must have let herself into the cottage while I was in Benton, and returned the dress while I was at lunch.

"I'd better lock every window and put a padlock on the door," she determined, selecting a green cotton dress to wear, "and also make some inquiries around here. Maybe someone saw a girl enter this cabin."

A newspaper Helen had bought that morning lay on a table. Absently Nancy looked at the first page. Suddenly her eyes widened. With interest she read a report about a red panel truck having been stolen two days before.

"An identifying mark," she read further, "is a chrome eagle ornament on the hood. The truck is believed to be in the vicinity of Benton."

Was this the truck which had forced her car into the ditch? Lieutenant Brice must have pursued her lead, and found out that the vehicle had been stolen.

"No wonder the driver was in such a hurry!" Nancy thought as she left the cottage.

On the way to join the others, Nancy had a sudden hunch. Mary Mason had left the inn

abruptly, with the flimsy excuse that the place was haunted. “I never pursued that lead,” the young sleuth told herself. “Anna was here then. Maybe she knows where Mary Mason is.”

Before joining her friends, Nancy hurried to the kitchen to talk to Anna. The waitress was not there. A strange girl came up to her, and introduced herself as Jean Holmes. Jean’s complexion was very pale, and her brown hair thick and combed close to her face. She wore heavy glasses.

“Can I help you?” she asked, smiling shyly.

Nancy inquired where Anna was. Jean said she had gone to the storage cellar. Nancy went downstairs and found Anna bringing out a supply of preserved fruits and jellies.

“Anna,” Nancy said, “I’m trying to locate Mary Mason who used to work here. Do you know her home address?”

Anna shook her head, but said she would inquire among the other waitresses who had been there when Mary was.

“Thank you,” said Nancy, and went to join her group on the patio.

She noticed that Maud Potter was not present. At the first opportunity, she asked Helen about this.

“Oh, Maud’s been very exclusive. She stayed in her room all afternoon.” Helen added dryly, “She hasn’t been missed.”

Maud did show up later and went to the dining room with the group. Nancy asked John if he had been rewarded in his sleuthing.

He shook his head. “I saw no ‘sharks,” and no one here admits to having used the canoe.”

This reminded Nancy of the fisherman she had seen on the river. Because of his hat, she had not been able to tell if his hair was crew cut. But she wondered if he might be the man Helen had seen after the girls’ canoe had capsized.

At the supper table Nancy confided this idea to her friend in a low tone. Helen wrinkled her brow. “From the general impression I had of Mr. Crew Cut, Nancy, he could be the same one. But of course I only saw him from a distance.”

Both girls became aware that Maud was eying them closely. “Planning another skin-diving excursion, Nancy?” the woman asked sarcastically.

Mrs. Willoughby hurriedly put in, “Oh, yes. I told Maud the latest—er—troubles.”

“I should hope so!” Maud said sharply. “If there are dangerous people lurking around here, I’d like to be warned.”

“Nancy’s the one in danger,” Emily reminded Maud coldly.

To change the subject, Nancy observed, “The new waitress, Jean Holmes, seems to be very efficient.”

Maud tossed her head. “I do have an instinct about people, you know.” But she was clearly pleased at Nancy’s remark.

After supper Nancy was leaving the room with the others when Anna came up behind her. “I have some information for you, Miss Drew,” the waitress whispered. “Mary Mason mostly kept to herself, but Kitty, one of the girls, thinks Mary commuted to Dockville every night. She also remembers that Mary once worked for a Mrs. Ernest Stonewell in River Heights.”

“You’re very helpful, Anna,” Nancy said. “Thank you.”

Nancy went to the hall desk and picked up a telephone directory. There were several Masons listed in Dockville, which was near River Heights. The young sleuth dialed the number of each Mason. Nobody knew Mary, the waitress. Nancy now looked up Mrs. Ernest Stonewell’s address.

“I’ll call her tomorrow.”

The rest of the evening Nancy spent playing a lively game of ping-pong with Helen, Emily, and John. Around eleven o’clock everyone said good night. John walked with the two girls to their cottage and warned them to secure the new inside bolt on the door, as well as the

bathroom window. “I’m within calling distance if you need me.” He smiled.

“Thanks, John,” said Nancy. “Every window sill in the bedroom will have a book on it. If any intruder tries getting in, I hope he won’t notice the book, and will knock it off and wake us!”

Before going to sleep, Nancy thought happily that her father would soon be home. How much she had to tell him!

Helen, in the meantime, was wide awake. She tossed and turned restlessly. Finally, at midnight, she got up and put on her bathrobe and slippers.

“Maybe some fresh air will help me sleep,” Helen thought.

Despite John’s warning, she slid the bolt and left the cottage, closing the door quietly. The grounds were dark and silent. Helen turned toward the lilac grove.

Suddenly she saw a flickering light ahead, near the grove. Curious, she drew closer. A veiled figure with black hair and wearing a glowing white gown confronted her. The next instant Helen was struck on the back of her head and fell unconsciousl

CHAPTER IX

The Search

BACK in the cottage, Nancy was awakened by an insistent ticking. She sat up and glanced in annoyance at her alarm clock. It certainly seemed noisy.

Suddenly Nancy realized that her friend's bed was empty. "Helen?" she called, thinking that perhaps the other girl had gone to get a glass of water. There was no reply.

"Where can Helen be at one-thirty in the morning?" Nancy asked herself. Hurriedly she put on robe and slippers and picked up her flashlight. When she found the front door of the cottage unbolted, she felt a pang of alarm.

Outside, Nancy searched the cottage area, calling her friend's name again and again. No response. Finally, thoroughly alarmed, Nancy decided to ask John for help. She knocked on his door. No answer. Perplexed, Nancy was about to leave when a twig crackled a short distance away. She turned off her flashlight and crouched behind a low shrub. Who was approaching? She was relieved a moment later to discern the familiar outline of John.

"Oh, thank goodness!" Nancy exclaimed, hurrying toward him. "Have you seen Helen?" she asked. "I woke up and found her gone."

"No, I haven't seen her," John replied. "I couldn't sleep so I walked down the road. Come on. We'll both look."

They started across the lawn.

"Let's check the inn first," Nancy proposed. "Maybe Helen's there."

The grounds seemed eerie in the moonless night as the couple walked quietly, beaming their flashes ahead of them. They circled the inn. The place was completely dark, with the exception of the tiny night light in the main lobby.

Nancy suggested they try all the doors. "If one is unlocked, it may mean Helen is inside."

The front, rear, patio, and kitchen doors were securely bolted from the inside.

"Perhaps Helen couldn't sleep and went for a walk near the river," John suggested.

Quickly he and Nancy went to the waterfront. Starting with the area near the dock, they proceeded along the bank, calling Helen's name. As they came to the lilac grove, John said:

"I don't think—"

He was interrupted by a low moan which came from beyond a lilac bush. The couple hurried toward it, with Nancy focusing the beam of her flashlight on the ground.

"Helen!" she exclaimed in horror.

Before them lay her friend, unconscious.

Quickly Nancy and John knelt beside Helen. John held the flashlight while Nancy made a rapid examination. Helen's pulse was normal, but there was an ugly lump on the back of her head.

John looked grim as Nancy chafed Helen's wrists. "She must have been struck by a blunt instrument," he said.

Helen's eyelids flickered open. For a moment the girl looked terrified, then smiled feebly as she recognized John and Nancy.

"Wh-what happened?" she murmured.

“Don’t talk,” Nancy said soothingly, but Helen insisted upon sitting up.

“Oh, my head!” she groaned, and leaned against Nancy.

A few minutes later the injured girl was able to talk. She explained about leaving the cabin and walking toward the lilac grove, then told of the strange figure in white she had seen.

Helen described the long translucent robe the figure had worn. “The last thing I saw was that ghostly figure waving her arms back and forth, as if signaling to someone. Then I was struck on the head and blacked out.”

“Don’t talk any more now,” said John, as Helen sighed wearily. “We’ll go back to the cottage and Nancy will put you to bed.”

John carried Helen, and with Nancy’s guiding light, headed toward the cottage. They had hardly started when the trio was startled by a loud *boo-oo-m!* It seemed to come from the direction of the cottages!

“That sounded like an explosion!” cried Nancy. She broke into a run.

John, carrying Helen, followed as fast as he could. A moment later Nancy heard a crackling noise and smelled smoke.

“John!” Nancy cried in horror. “Look! Our cottage is on fire!”

The young people stared ahead in dismay. Tongues of orange-red flames were indeed shooting upward from the girls’ cottage! The trio could already feel the heat from the blaze.

“We’ll have to douse it,” John said tensely. “The whole row will burn down if we wait for the fire department.”

Helen insisted she was strong enough to walk. “I can help!”

John raced to the side of the inn where an extension water hose was attached. “Get the buckets near the kitchen door!” he shouted to the girls.

They dashed toward the inn. At the same time, the hall lights came on and the front door was flung open. Emily, Maud, and Mrs. Willoughby, dressed in robes, rushed out. Behind them was Mr. Daly, carrying a Revolutionary War musket!

Each group was amazed to see the other but Nancy took no time asking questions. “Our cottage is on fire!” she announced.

Soon everyone joined in tossing bucket after bucket of water from a garden spigot onto the blaze. John played a steady stream from the hose. Gradually the blaze was reduced to embers.

“Glad we saved the other units, anyhow,” John said, glancing at the ruined guest cottage. “Too bad you girls lost all your clothes.”

“But saved our lives by not being in the cottage,” Nancy remarked grimly.

“How did the fire start? What caused that explosion?” Emily asked, explaining that she and the others had been awakened by the noise.

“I believe,” Nancy said gravely, “it was caused by a time bomb which someone placed in our cottage before we went to bed. A ticking sound woke me. I thought it was my clock.”

Her listeners were shocked. Mrs. Willoughby grew deathly pale, as Maud shrilled, “There must be a lunatic loose around here.”

For once Nancy was inclined to agree with her. The young sleuth added that of course nothing could be determined until daylight when the ruins would be examined.

The exhausted group went back to the inn. “Nancy and Helen,” Emily said, “I feel terrible about this whole thing.”

Mrs. Willoughby, too, expressed her regret. “At least some of the loss will be covered by our fire insurance,” she added.

Nancy smiled and nodded, then started to relate Helen’s startling experience just before the fire.

When Nancy came to the part about the woman in the white robe, Emily shivered. “I don’t believe in ghosts,” she averred, “but Mary Mason probably saw this person. That’s why she said Lilac Inn was haunted!”

Nancy suddenly noticed how pale Helen was and suggested she get to bed at once.

“Oh, yes,” said Emily. “Nancy and Helen, take the front second-floor bedroom.”

Nancy noticed that Mr. Daly still clutched the ancient musket. With a sheepish smile, he said, “Shortly before the explosion, I thought I heard someone prowling around outside. I grabbed this old musket—guess it’s been here since the inn was built. It’s not loaded, but I figured it might scare away an intruder.”

John grinned. “Nancy and I were your ‘prowlers.’ ” He explained that they had tried all the doors in their search for Helen.

The women and girls started upstairs. John and Mr. Daly, carrying his musket, said they

would “stand guard” for the rest of the night.

As Emily showed Nancy and Helen to their room, she said firmly, “This awful experience has made me decide to call the police first thing in the morning!”

“Oh, Emily, thank goodness!” Helen exclaimed in relief. “If there is some kind of maniac loose at Lilac Inn, you’ll be doing the right thing.”

Emily stepped closer to the girls. “When the police arrive,” she whispered, “I’d appreciate it if you still don’t mention the diamond theft.”

Her friends, though surprised, promised not to say a word about it.

“You see,” Emily went on softly, “it’s not for my sake, but Aunt Hazel’s. I can’t explain any more right now. You go to bed. I’ll call you if I need you.”

Nancy and Helen were too polite to ask further questions. Nevertheless, Nancy fell asleep wondering about Emily’s request. When the young sleuth awoke in the morning, her first thought was of the bomb. When had it been planted? While she was skin diving?

“The person who placed the bomb might have been seen by someone connected with the inn,” Nancy speculated.

Helen awoke just then, and Nancy asked how she felt. “Fine, except for a slight headache.” Helen shuddered. “Last night seems like a terrible dream!”

A few minutes later Emily knocked on the door with clothes for Helen and Nancy to borrow. While they dressed, she reported that a trooper from the Benton State Police Barracks would be over shortly to inspect the burned cottage.

“John checked the lilac grove at daybreak,” she added. “There were lots of footprints of various sizes, but no sign of any suspicious person.”

“Maybe I *was* dreaming I saw the ghost,” Helen said. She felt the back of her head. “But this bump is real!”

The three girls went down to breakfast. John, Mrs. Willoughby, and Maud were already at the table. No other guests were in the room. Nancy gave her order to Anna.

At a nearby table the waitress Jean Holmes was arranging flowers in a copper vase. The girl smiled shyly at Nancy, picked up the bowl, and walked toward the bay window. As she started to place the flowers on the wide sill, Jean gave a startled cry. She dropped the bowl, scattering flowers and water on the floor.

Everyone at the table stared out the window. Two men were peering in. Nancy recognized them and jumped to her feet in surprise.

CHAPTER X

"Blue Pipes"

THE unexpected sight of the two men peering through the dining-room window had startled Nancy, but in a happy way. She recognized the observers as her father and the state trooper, Lieutenant Brice.

As Jean apologized for her clumsiness and went to the kitchen for her broom and mop, Nancy hurried to the hall. She greeted her tall, handsome father and the officer who had come to her rescue when her car was forced into the ditch.

"Nancy, are you all right?" was Carson Drew's first question.

"Oh, just fine, Dad. What a nice surprise to see you!" She kissed him affectionately. With a smile she added, "I didn't expect to see you again so soon, Lieutenant Brice."

The officer grinned. He explained that he had been assigned to investigate the cottage fire. When he arrived at Lilac Inn, he had met Carson Drew, who had just driven up. The two men were completing a quick tour of the grounds when they passed the dining room and looked in.

Mr. Drew chuckled. "I thought I'd surprise you, Nancy, but I didn't expect to scare that waitress."

"So many upsetting things have happened here, Dad," Nancy said, "I guess everyone's a bit nervous."

Mr. Drew said that until he had met the officer in the parking lot, he had heard nothing of the trouble at Lilac Inn.

"The lieutenant mentioned last night's explosion and fire here. Then he asked if I were the father of the Nancy Drew who had the accident on the side road to Benton."

"You haven't talked to Hannah?" Nancy asked.

"No. I came directly here." Mr. Drew put an arm around his daughter. "I'm concerned about you.

"I'm all right, Dad," Nancy insisted. "Really I am. By the way, have you talked to Chief McGinnis?"

"Yes. That's another reason I came here," her father said. "I had to phone him on a legal matter. He told me that you found the charge plate and the envelope with your name on it. By the way, there were no helpful prints on either the plate or the envelope."

Nancy decided to wait before telling her father of the other mysterious incidents, and now suggested that the men come into the dining room to breakfast. She made the necessary introductions. The Willoughbys and Mr. Drew were well acquainted and exchanged warm greetings.

Maud fluttered her eyelashes. "So *you're* the famous criminal lawyer," she said coyly.

Carson Drew did not like flattery, but nodded politely. He congratulated Emily on her forthcoming marriage. When the men had finished eating, Nancy and her friends went with them to see the burned cottage.

Emily told Lieutenant Brice everything that had happened but excluded the diamond theft. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then said, "All could be malicious pranks, not connected with the explosion. On the other hand, they could very well be part of some big scheme."

When the group reached the site of the burned cottage, they found John there. Nancy

introduced him to her father and the police officer.

After Lieutenant Brice had probed the ruins of the cottage, Nancy and her friends gave him and Mr. Drew a full account of the previous night's events. When he heard of Helen's experience, Mr. Drew looked grave and suggested she return home.

Helen shook her head. "I can't desert Nancy."

The young sleuth smiled gratefully. Secretly she longed to tell her father the rest of the story—the trip to Benton, the diamond turning up in her purse, the faked message from John, and her skin-diving adventure. But all these, Nancy realized, were related to Emily's stolen gems.

Finally Lieutenant Brice announced, "I've found fragments of what I am positive was a time bomb you heard ticking, Miss Drew. I'll send an explosives expert over to verify this, however."

Carson Drew turned to his daughter. "Nancy, I wish I could stay here and help you work out this mystery. Unfortunately, I have to return to River Heights and review highly important evidence for a case I'm to try next week. But keep me posted."

"I will, Dad. In fact, I may see you if I do some sleuthing near home, as I plan."

Before leaving, Mr. Drew asked if Nancy had come upon any leads to her impersonator.

"Nothing definite, Dad," was all Nancy could in truth reply.

The attorney then advised Emily to engage a guard to stand night duty. "I can recommend an excellent man," he said. "His name is Carl Bard."

Emily agreed and Mr. Drew went inside the inn to telephone him. He returned shortly and said Mr. Bard would report there later.

"Fine," said Lieutenant Brice. "And I'll have a squad car patrol the inn frequently. I suggest that no one venture out alone—especially at night—until this case is broken."

Good-bys were exchanged, and Nancy stood waving to her father as he drove off. Meanwhile, Helen and Emily had started for the patio.

As Nancy hurried after them, she came to the tool shed. John had investigated it, but Nancy wondered if she might find some clue he had overlooked.

The door was open. She went inside. Spades, hoes, rakes, and other similar equipment lined the walls. Nancy studied the array. "Just ordinary garden tools," she mused. Then suddenly she noticed a pad of notepaper lying on a bench. Nancy picked it up and turned the pages, which contained various notations for the gardeners. One item, on the third page and in a different kind of printing from the other instructions, read: "Prune blue pipes near grove."

" 'Blue pipes,' " thought Nancy, as she tore out the sheet. "Now what does that mean? Could it possibly be a code message? Or a signal? I'll ask the gardeners."

She left the shed, and began to look for the men. The only man in sight was Gil, who was cutting the lawn with a power mower. She went up, and attracting his attention, asked him, "Can you tell me what 'blue pipes' are?"

"Never heard of 'em," Gil replied laconically.

"One more question," Nancy said. "Would you have any idea who used one of the inn's canoes yesterday afternoon?"

For a moment Gil's eyes narrowed. Then he brusquely replied No; he had not been near the dock all day. "Mr. John asked me the same thing. Well, I got work to do," he muttered, and quickly resumed his mowing.

Nancy walked meditatively toward the inn. "If Gil doesn't know what 'blue pipes' are, that message might well be a code phrase."

It occurred to her that perhaps Mr. Daly would be able to explain the term. Nancy went inside and found the elderly gentleman in his office, going over receipts. He looked up as she knocked and entered.

"Good morning, Nancy. Sorry I missed meeting your father."

Mr. Daly admitted that he had been wearied by his all-night vigil, and had gone to his room to rest. Nancy smiled understandingly and told him briefly of Lieutenant Brice's investigation.

Mr. Daly looked grave. "If all this danger continues, I'm going to insist that Emily and Dick sell the inn. A nice young couple shouldn't start marriage under such circumstances."

"I agree. But the person responsible for the trouble here must be caught."

"You're right, Nancy," Mr. Daly said, "I mustn't lose hope so easily."

The young sleuth then asked, "Mr. Daly, can you tell me what 'blue pipes' are?"

Mr. Daly chuckled. "Of course—my favorite subject matter is 'blue pipes'—or lilacs."

"You mean that 'blue pipes' are lilacs?" Nancy inquired with interest.

"Yes. The ancient name of the lilac was Blue Pipe Tree, a reminder of the time when pipes were made of its wood. See here."

Mr. Daly reached into a drawer of his desk and handed Nancy a half-finished tobacco pipe. "Carving is my hobby. I'm making this pipe from the wood of a fallen tree limb right here at Lilac Inn."

"Why, it's beautiful!" Nancy held up the pipe, admiring the delicate stem.

At that moment Jean Holmes passed the office. She paused and looked in. Nancy greeted her, but the waitress barely answered. Her eyes were riveted on the pipe in Nancy's hand.

"Isn't this a handsome piece, Jean?" Nancy said pleasantly. "Mr. Daly made it."

"Oh, very." Jean nodded and hastened on into the dining room.

To Nancy it seemed that the waitress had acted almost frightened. Why?

Mr. Daly seemed not to have noticed. He went on to tell Nancy some interesting facts about lilacs. The old-fashioned, lavender-colored blossom and its white companion, so well known in America, originally came from Bulgaria, Hungary, and Rumania. But the double lilacs of pink, red, and purple, like those in the grove, were developed by horticulturists.

"The French developed the Lucie Baltet variety—the same as the stolen tree," Mr. Daly said sadly. "Many beautiful lilacs are named after famous French people, such as Joan of Arc."

"You're certainly an expert on every aspect of lilacs," Nancy complimented him as Mr. Daly paused.

Modestly, Mr. Daly admitted he had studied the subject intensively. He himself had planted most of the lilacs at the inn.

"They are considered a flower of mysterious power in the West Indies," he said solemnly. "Some people there believe that the perfume keeps away ghosts and evil spirits. A lilac tree is often planted near the front door so its branches can act as protection against evil spirits entering the house."

Nancy now pulled the sheet with the blue pipe notation from her pocket and passed it to Mr. Daly. "Do you know anything about this?" she asked.

He glanced at it and said, "No. And I write out all the instructions for the gardeners. I never use the term 'blue pipes.' They wouldn't know what it meant."

"Have you any idea who might have written this?" Nancy asked.

"None whatever. And I can't figure out what it means. Besides, it's not time to prune lilacs. Have you a theory?"

"I'm not sure, except I have a hunch it's connected with the strange happenings at Lilac Inn and is a code message. I hope I can figure it out."

Nancy pocketed the sheet and left the office. Deep in thought, she almost bumped into Emily.

"Oh, where's Detective Drew headed?"

The young sleuth laughed, then showed Emily the sheet. "Do you know who printed this strange notation?"

Emily stared at the message for several seconds. Finally she said, “No, but the printing looks familiar.”

“Think hard and don’t keep any secrets,” Nancy urged. “This may be the turning point in solving the mystery!”

Staring into space, Emily sought desperately for an answer. Suddenly she snapped her fingers. “I have it! That waitress who left here so suddenly! She used to print all the orders she took. I mean *Mary Mason!”*

CHAPTER XI

A Tip from a Waitress

"MARY MASON again!" exclaimed Nancy. "That settles it! I'm going to River Heights at once and talk to Mrs. Ernest Stonewell, the woman for whom she used to work."

Nancy decided to tell Helen her plan, so the two girls went out to the patio where she was reading. Nancy revealed her latest findings and told of her proposed trip. "Want to come?" she asked Helen.

"No, thanks." Helen chuckled. "You work better alone. What a clue this is! Maybe you'll come back with the mystery solved!"

"Don't count on that." Nancy smiled. "Where is everybody?"

"John's at the burned cottage with the explosives expert. Mrs. Willoughby and Maud are upstairs."

Nancy leaned toward Emily and said in a low voice, "I hope you won't mind my asking, but — but does Maud Potter have anything to do with your not reporting the diamond theft?"

Emily sighed. "Well, yes. You've probably sensed, Nancy, that she seems to have some influence over Aunt Hazel."

Helen's eyes grew wide. "You mean Maud's sort of—blackmailing her?"

The bride-to-be looked unhappy. "I'm really not sure."

"And," Nancy conjectured, "you're afraid Maud has some knowledge of the diamonds that may involve your aunt if the theft is publicized?"

"That's the feeling I have."

Before the girls could discuss the matter further, Maud herself came onto the patio. She sank into a chair. "Having a conference?" she asked sweetly.

"Yes," Emily replied promptly. "Nancy's going on a sleuthing trip to River Heights."

"Oh?" Maud's eyelids flickered. "You have what they call a 'hot clue'?" she asked Nancy.

"I hope so," replied the young sleuth calmly.

"Well, give my regards to your dad if you see him," Maud said airily.

Nancy rose. "I'd better get started. I'll pick up more clothes for you and me, Helen." She laughed. "Then we can return yours, Em."

Suddenly the group became aware that Jean Holmes, dressed in street clothes, stood in the doorway. She smiled timidly and said:

"Miss Drew, I heard you say that you're going to River Heights. I need a few things I left in the room I shared in town with a girl friend." She turned to Emily, and asked permission to accompany Nancy and get them.

"All right," Emily said. "I trust you'll return in time to serve supper?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Willoughby. I'll take the afternoon bus back."

Nancy told Emily she herself probably would be back by evening.

"We'll be on pins and needles until then," Helen said.

Just before Nancy and Jean reached the convertible, Emily caught up to them. Drawing Nancy aside, she whispered, "I've been thinking —will you tell your father about my

diamonds and the other incidents? Perhaps he can give you helpful advice. But please ask him to say nothing to the police, unless there's no other way out."

Nancy was delighted. She would feel much better if she could discuss this aspect of the case with her father.

In a few minutes she and Jean were headed for River Heights. Although Nancy had lost her handbag with wallet and driver's license in the fire, Mr. Drew had obtained special permission for her to drive until her new license was mailed. Fortunately, he had had a key to her car in his key case, and had left it with her.

"This is a lovely convertible," Jean spoke up.

Nancy smiled as the car rode smoothly past farm land and woods. "Where did you work before coming to Lilac Inn, Jean?" she asked.

"Many different places," the girl replied. "Florida in the winter, sometimes, and in the summer, I come north."

Later, as they neared River Heights, the waitress said abruptly:

"Miss Drew, I had another reason for asking to ride with you. I wanted to tell you someone at the inn is trying to make trouble for you!"

"What do you mean?" Nancy asked, as they reached the outskirts of River Heights.

Jean hesitated at first, then said she didn't want to be accused of spying. "I think," she said finally, "Mrs. Potter is up to something funny!"

"Why?"

Jean revealed that twice she had seen Maud going into Nancy's room—yesterday, at the cottage, and then at the inn that morning.

"Really?" Nancy tried to appear nonchalant. "At what times?"

Jean was vague. She said that she had arrived at the inn shortly before lunch the previous day. "I was unpacking in my room," Jean went on. "I looked out the window and saw Mrs. Potter enter your cottage.

"This morning," she continued, "I was at the second-floor linen closet when I heard footsteps. I looked down the hall in time to see Mrs. Potter lock your door."

Nancy's mind raced. Was Maud directly implicated in the strange happenings at the inn? For what purpose had she entered the girls' rooms? It struck Nancy as odd, however, that Jean would inform on the woman who had helped her obtain a job. To the waitress she merely said, "Thank you for telling me."

"You and Miss Corning were lucky that you weren't hurt in the cottage fire," Jean remarked.

"Yes, very lucky," Nancy replied. Evidently Emily had said nothing to the servants about a bomb being the real cause of the blaze.

Nancy asked Jean if she had ever met a girl named Mary Mason from Dockville. "Mary used to work at the inn."

Jean wrinkled her brow. "No, although the name is familiar. Perhaps I once met a Miss Mason at one of the places I've worked."

They were now entering the business section of River Heights. Jean asked Nancy to let her off in the center of town. "I'm going to the optician's first. Then I'll go to my girl friend's."

Nancy stopped near Burk's Department Store. Jean thanked her profusely and got out. The young sleuth drove to a nearby tearoom for a quick snack. Then she continued on to Meadowbrook Lane, in an attractive residential section, where Mrs. Stonewell lived. Nancy soon spotted the number and stopped in front of an imposing Tudor-style home.

She hurried up to the front entrance and rang the doorbell. A maid answered. Nancy gave her name and asked to see Mrs. Stonewell. The caller was requested to take a seat in the living room.

A few minutes later Mrs. Stonewell, attractively dressed in a tailored sports suit, stepped

into the room. With a gracious smile, she asked, “Is there something I can do for you, Miss Drew?”

“Yes, Mrs. Stonewell. I’m trying to trace a girl named Mary Mason,” Nancy explained. “I understand she worked for you.”

The woman’s smile vanished. “Let’s say I hired her. But I didn’t get much work from Mary Mason. I discharged her after a month.” She glanced at Nancy curiously. *“You* don’t want to hire her?”

“Oh, no,” Nancy replied. “She has some information I need. Do you know Mary’s home address?”

“No. She lived in while working for me,” said Mrs. Stonewell. “I do remember she occasionally visited a brother in Dockville. Whether or not she is living there, I can’t say. Nor do I know the street address.”

“One more question,” Nancy said. “Did you ever miss anything while Mary was working for you?”

“Not that I know of.”

Nancy thanked Mrs. Stonewell and departed. She decided that when she returned to Lilac Inn later that day she would go by way of Dockville. Her next stop was at Helen’s house. Nancy reassured Mrs. Corning, who had read about the fire, of Helen’s well-being.

“Nancy,” Mrs. Corning said, “the newspaper didn’t state how the fire started. I suppose the usual carelessness—someone tossing away a lighted match.”

Nancy, inwardly relieved, replied that this was always a possibility. She did not mention the time bomb.

With additional clothes for Helen in her car, Nancy drove home. She found that Mr. Drew was out for the afternoon in connection with his case.

When Hannah heard Nancy’s account of the fire, she exclaimed, “Even on a pleasure trip, Nancy, danger follows you!” She looked at the girl knowingly. “And what about this twin of yours? Has she followed you to Lilac Inn?”

“Hannah, you’re becoming a detective,” Nancy accused fondly. “Seriously,” she added, “you guessed it. She even managed to fool a friend of Emily’s fiancé who’s staying out there. But she vanished again.”

Hannah sighed. “I’ll certainly be glad when she’s caught.”

“I hope to do that soon,” Nancy stated. “After I pack some clothes, I’m going sleuthing in Dockville.” She explained about tracing Mary Mason.

“That’s a terrible place,” Hannah cried worriedly. “Oh, dear, I’d better go with you.”

“Don’t worry,” said Nancy. “I’ll be safe in the daylight. When Dad gets back, please tell him where I’ve gone.”

Nancy quickly packed a suitcase. She also took along her spare set of skin-diving gear. Then, before leaving, she wrote her father a note telling the details of the jewelry theft.

When she reached Dockville later, Nancy glanced about in dismay. She was confronted with row upon row of dingy tenements. In which one did the suspect’s brother live?

Nancy stopped her convertible and inquired of a stout woman where she could find a family by the name of Mason. The woman shook her head, evidently not understanding English.

“I’ll try another block,” Nancy decided, and turned into a winding narrow street which led along the river front.

She decided to inquire again and pulled up to the curb. She was about to alight when she glanced in the rear-view mirror. Directly behind her was a red panel truck. It looked exactly like the stolen vehicle which had forced her off the road. No one was in it, but the motor was running. Nancy turned her head to get a better look at the truck.

At the same moment she saw a large rock hurtling through the air toward her open

window!

CHAPTER XII

A Daring Plan

BANG! The rock struck the door of Nancy's convertible, just as she ducked down. When Nancy cautiously raised her head a few seconds later, she looked all around to see if she could spot the rock thrower. No one was in sight.

Nancy glanced into the rear-view mirror again. The red truck had disappeared! Had the truck driver thrown the rock? If it had struck her, she would have been badly injured. A peculiar coincidence, at the least, Nancy thought.

Quickly Nancy climbed out and examined her car door. The rock had made a dent, but there was no further damage. She determined to continue her search for Mary Mason, and hailed a grocer's delivery truck which was coming down the street. When she asked the driver if he had seen the red truck, the man said No.

"Do you know where I might find someone here by the name of Mason?" Nancy inquired.

"Yes. Bud Mason. He lives in the next block, on Sixth Street," the man replied. "I've made deliveries there. It's number 12."

Nancy thanked him. She drove along the river, and turned left on Sixth Street. The houses here were in better condition than the others she had seen in Dockville. Number twelve was a white cottage with flowers bordering the front path.

When Nancy rang the bell, the door was opened by a red-haired woman of about thirty-five. She had clear-cut features and wore heavy make-up. She wore a snug-fitting lavender dress.

Nancy introduced herself and said she was looking for a Miss Mary Mason who had worked at Lilac Inn.

"You've come to the right address," the woman replied. "I'm Mary. Come in."

"Thank you." Nancy entered a room furnished with comfortable leather furniture, books, and several pictures of nautical scenes.

The woman eyed her caller curiously. She invited Nancy to sit down and asked, "What brings you here?"

Nancy explained that she was a friend of Emily Willoughby and was visiting at Lilac Inn.

"Miss Willoughby tells me you left because the inn was haunted," Nancy went on. "Since then, she's been wondering what you meant. I said I'd try to find you and ask."

Mary had listened attentively. Now she gave a high-pitched giggle. "So Miss Willoughby's getting scared. It's true—Lilac Inn is haunted!"

Mary proceeded to give Nancy a dramatic story of hearing footsteps at night when no one was around. She said that several times when she had been working late in the kitchen, a ghostly face had looked in the window.

"It's a spooky old place!" Mary shuddered. "I don't know how I stood it—the grounds are so lonely and creepy at night. Besides, commuting to my brother's here was too long a trip."

Nancy wondered if she were on the wrong track, after all. Perhaps Mary had left because of fright, and had wanted merely to find work closer to town.

The young sleuth looked around. "This is a pleasant home," she said. "Have you always lived with your brother?"

Mary answered readily, “No, just since I returned to Dockville, two months ago. I worked down South during the winter, and before that, out West. I hadn’t seen Bud for a couple of years. When I came back here, he suggested I get a job nearby.”

She paused. “Say, Miss Drew, how did you know I was in Dockville?”

Nancy explained about her call on Mrs. Stonewell.

Mary scowled. “That fuss-budget wanted a slave, not a maid. I was glad when she fired me.”

Mary went on to say that after she left Lilac Inn, she had stayed here. “I’m keeping house for Bud until I find a really good deal.”

“Oh—by the way,” Nancy said casually, “the other day I found a note to the gardeners. I understand you printed it.”

For a fraction of a second Nancy was sure she detected a startled look on Mary’s face. Then the former waitress laughed heartily. “Oh, Miss Drew, isn’t that funny you should have found that?”

“Then you knew lilacs are called ‘blue pipes’?” Nancy asked. “And what in the world did the message mean?”

After a short pause, Mary answered, “I don’t know. Someone asked me to write it.”

“Who?”

“I don’t remember his name. I wasn’t there long, you know.”

Nancy went through the list of names of the gardeners, but Mary still insisted she did not remember who had asked her to print the message.

“Another thing,” said Nancy. “I phoned this house the other day and was told no Mary Mason who had worked at Lilac Inn was here.”

Mary Mason flushed. “I don’t know who answered the phone. Around here nobody calls me Mary. That’s my business name. I’m Dotty Mae. My full name is Dorothy Mary.”

“I see,” said Nancy. “Sorry.”

Mary stood up. “Hate to rush you, Miss Drew. But I’m er—expecting company.”

She accompanied Nancy to the door. The young sleuth said good-by and went to her car. She started the engine, glancing surreptitiously at the Masons’ cottage. Nancy plainly saw the window curtain move, as if someone were standing behind it, watching her.

As she drove away, Nancy reviewed the conversation. Mary Mason had seemed quite friendly, and sometimes a bit flighty. Nancy reflected that Mary’s explanation of the “blue pipes” note sounded logical, but that the woman’s whole story had been overly glib. She had, Nancy felt, not been entirely truthful.

“Why didn’t she want to tell *me* who asked her to write the note about ‘blue pipes’?” Nancy’s hands gripped the wheel hard as a startling idea occurred to her. “She’s shielding someone.”

“Blue pipes” *was* being used as a signal—perhaps between persons at Lilac Inn and an outside accomplice. Were Mary Mason and a gardener two of them? And could Maud possibly be a third member of the group? Were they responsible for the diamond theft?

“They’re all familiar with the place,” Nancy reasoned, “and might have learned of the secret closet.”

If this were the case, she speculated, the three might have other assistants. “For instance,” Nancy thought, “the woman who bumped into me in Benton, whoever put the diamond in my purse, and the person who placed the bomb in our cottage.”

Nancy felt excitedly that her theory was worth following. She decided to return home and see if her father were there.

When Nancy arrived she was delighted to find Carson Drew at the desk in his study. The lawyer went over the whole case with his daughter, then shook his head in amazement. “This is a many-sided case you’ve tackled,” he remarked. “I’m inclined to agree that the mysteries at

Lilac Inn and your impersonator are linked together, and that 'blue pipes' *is* a signal of some kind."

Mr. Drew leaned forward in his chair. "Of course," he said, "Emily should report her entire story to the police. If Maud Potter does hold a threat over Mrs. Willoughby, she'll be dealt with by the law.

"Frankly I'm more alarmed about the spear throwing and time bomb than any other angle to the case, Nancy," Mr. Drew said somberly. "You and Helen are in constant danger."

Nancy said she realized this. "I'll be on my guard every minute," she promised. "And keep my eyes and ears open for any more 'blue pipe' messages."

The young detective went across the room to hug her father. "Dad, it's so helpful to talk everything over with you."

Mr. Drew looked at his daughter keenly. "There's something else on your mind. Want to tell me?"

He had observed a troubled expression come over Nancy's pretty features. Now she replied, "Yes. Dad, what's your impression of Sergeant John McBride?"

"I think he's a fine, intelligent young man," Mr. Drew said. "And seems to be quite taken with you," he teased.

Nancy's face remained serious. "I like him, too. But—well, Helen has a feeling he's at the inn for some other purpose than just helping Em and Dick."

Mr. Drew shook his head. "Nancy, don't worry. John may have his own reasons for being at Lilac Inn. But I firmly believe he's *not* mixed up in any jewel theft!"

With a smile Nancy said, "You're such a good judge of character. I knew you'd relieve my mind."

The lawyer then advised his daughter, despite Emily Willoughby's concern, to phone Chief McGinnis and tell him the whole story.

"He can use his own judgment on how to proceed. Also, he can dismiss the police guard at our home."

Nancy put in the call and gave the chief a detailed report, including the appearance of the stolen red truck in Dockville.

"I'll notify the authorities there at once," he said.

She inquired if there were police records of Dorothy Mary (Dotty Mae) Mason, Maud Potter, or any of the gardeners at Lilac Inn.

"I'll check." When the officer returned to the phone, he said, "No, Nancy. Nothing."

She promised to keep in touch and hung up. The girl's thoughts spun from subject to subject. Suddenly a daring plan popped into her head. "I'll try it!" Nancy decided.

Again she picked up the telephone. This time she dialed Lilac Inn. Emily answered.

"I think I'm making progress," Nancy told her friend. "I may not see you until tomorrow morn ing. Will you explain to everyone?"

"Of course." Emily then said happily that Dick had arrived. Her fiancé had learned from the explosives expert that the cottage fire definitely had been caused by a time bomb. The police were still working on the case.

Nancy said good-by, and mentally rehearsed her plan. "I've had sleuthing adventures before," she thought. "But this will be the first time I've impersonated a 'ghost'!"

CHAPTER XIII

The Guard's Mistake

WHEN Nancy confided to her father the idea of impersonating the ghostly woman in the lilac grove, Mr. Drew looked dubious.

"I think it's risky, Nancy. And also, how do you know any of the gang is going to see you?"

"I don't. I only hope so. But, Dad, if I'm convincing enough, someone may call me by her name, and I may learn to whom she was signaling, without raising suspicion."

Reluctantly Mr. Drew gave his consent. "If anything goes wrong, scream as loudly as you can."

"I will. But I intend to do a good acting job," Nancy assured her father.

Right after supper she went to the attic and opened a storage trunk. From it Nancy took out a white evening dress, long-sleeved and flowing. A further search disclosed a black wig she had once used at a costume party, and a transparent white scarf.

"Just the props I need," Nancy thought.

Returning to her room, Nancy tried on the hairpiece. To her satisfaction it completely hid her own hair. Next, she wired pocket-size flashlights to the cuff of each sleeve of the gown.

"These provide a glowing effect," she thought.

Nancy packed the wig and dress in her suitcase. Then she went downstairs and kissed her father and Hannah good-by.

"I wish you weren't going back to Lilac Inn," Hannah fretted.

"Now, Hannah," said Mr. Drew, "you know Nancy wouldn't give up any mystery until it's solved."

He then requested his daughter to telephone him the next morning. Nancy promised and left the house. She reached Benton at eight o'clock. Dusk was closing in, but it had to be considerably darker before Nancy could proceed to Lilac Inn.

She took a side road out of town. "Doris lives close to the inn," she recalled. "I'll drop in to see her." Presently she drove into a dirt lane leading to the Drakes' attractive white farmhouse.

She found Doris and her parents playing croquet on the front lawn. They greeted her cordially.

"About time you came to call," Doris scolded teasingly. "Nancy, any more news about your double?"

"Well, yes." Nancy smiled. "It's turned into quite a mystery, which I'm trying to solve."

"I understand. Detective at work," Doris guessed wisely.

Nancy then asked the Drakes if they knew a fisherman in the vicinity who wore his hair in a crew cut. They shook their heads.

"Does anyone own the dock between yours and the one at Lilac Inn?" Nancy questioned.

Mr. Drake replied that there was no house on the adjoining property. He understood the dock had been abandoned for years.

By the time Nancy took her leave and drew near the inn, it was dark. She decided to park in the apple orchard. As the girl detective got out of her car she felt raindrops. She took a

plastic coat with attached hood from the trunk of her convertible and put it on. Then, carrying her suitcase, she dashed toward the inn.

When she reached it, Nancy circled the building cautiously, not wishing to be seen by anyone. The old inn was ablaze with lights. As Nancy approached the recreation room she heard dance music.

She crept up to the shrubbery and peered in. Helen and John were dancing, and Emily's partner was a young man of medium build with reddish-brown hair and a rather serious expression.

"That must be Dick," Nancy surmised. She observed that Maud, Mrs. Willoughby, and Mr. Daly were talking in a far corner of the room.

"I'm glad they are having fun," Nancy thought, continuing around the inn. There was no sign near the building of the guard her father had obtained. No doubt he was down near the river. Nancy walked to the guest cottages, hoping that one might not be locked. Nancy tried the doors and finally came to one that opened.

"Brrrr!" she shivered, stepping into the chilly, damp room. Nancy's eyes quickly became accustomed to the gloom. The place had no furniture but a chair. "I'll have plenty of time to get ready. The ghost won't be out until the inn is dark. I may as well rest and go over my act," she thought, and sat down on the chair. "I only hope my masquerade will bring results."

The time crept by slowly, but finally Nancy saw by the luminous dial of her watch that it was eleven-thirty. She looked out the window. The rain had stopped and a few stars twinkled above.

All the lights in the inn were out. She noticed that John's cottage, too, was in darkness. "That's funny. He must have come back, but I haven't heard any footsteps since I've been here," Nancy mused. "Wonder where he is."

She opened her suitcase and lifted out the dress and wig. She put them on and took a small flashlight from her handbag.

Cautiously the masquerader made her way to the lilac grove, taking care not to stumble over roots or twigs. As she drew near it, Nancy thought she heard the distant put-put of a motorboat. But the sound soon faded away.

An owl hooted nearby. The darkness beneath the overhanging trees seemed forbidding. Suddenly Nancy felt panicky, but resolutely she put aside her fears. She clicked on the small flashlights attached to her sleeves and walked toward the spot where Helen had been struck. Dramatically, Nancy waved her arms back and forth.

"I wonder if someone will reply," she thought.

At the same moment she heard a noise in the underbrush. A small animal darted across her path, followed by the crunch of footsteps. Quickly extinguishing her lights, Nancy ducked behind a tall lilac.

The girl's heart pounded. A figure in glowing white moved slowly toward her hiding place. At this moment the moon came out from behind a cloud, illuminating the grove.

Nancy gasped. The other girl was in a long trailing gown. But Nancy felt as though she were looking into a mirror. The young woman's face seemed identical to Nancy's and she wore her titian-blond hair in exactly the same fashion Nancy usually did.

"My impersonator!" Nancy cried out involuntarily.

The strange woman stopped abruptly. She scanned the area with her eyes. Nancy came to a sudden decision: she would meet her "twin" face to face!

“I only hope my masquerade will bring results”

Without hesitation Nancy clicked on her lights and darted from behind the bush. She confronted the other figure in white. The young woman gave a start of complete surprise upon seeing Nancy. Before either could say a word, heavy footsteps were heard approaching.

The strange girl turned and fled. The next instant Nancy’s arm was seized by a man. “Let go of me!” she cried.

The man relaxed his grip and Nancy whirled around to face him. He was tall, husky, and wore slacks and a sports shirt.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm a guard—Carl Bard."

"I'm Carson Drew's daughter, Nancy," she said quickly. "We must catch the young woman. She's an impostor and—"

She broke off. Carl Bard was staring at her in obvious disbelief. "I don't see anybody else, only you, miss. But Mr. Drew told me his daughter is blond."

In dismay, Nancy remembered the black wig she was wearing. "Oh—this is sort of a masquerade," she explained, snatching off the wig and hiding it inside her sleeve. "I'm visiting at Lilac Inn, and I know that my father suggested you come here."

"True. But I heard Miss Willoughby say Nancy Drew wouldn't be returning tonight." The guard's tone was still suspicious. Again he gripped Nancy's arm. "You'd better come to the inn with me. We'll find out who you are."

Exasperated, Nancy cried out "You must believe me. There was another girl here! She escaped just before you saw me. She's a thief!"

The guard was adamant, and Nancy had no choice but to accompany him.

"My disguise certainly boomeranged," Nancy thought in disgust as she snapped off the flashlights in her sleeves.

When they reached the inn the guard rang the bell of the back door, which was closest. In a few minutes Emily and Maud appeared, both in robes and slippers.

"Mr. Bard! Is something wrong?" Emily asked, after flicking on the outside light.

"I found this young woman—" the guard began as he and Nancy stepped inside.

"Nancy Drew!" Emily exclaimed. "We didn't expect you until tomorrow!"

"And all dressed up, too. Been to a dance?" Maud asked curiously.

Nancy noticed that the social director wore full make-up. Had she really been in her room, or could Maud Potter have been the person Nancy's double was to meet in the grove? If so, Maud might have seen Nancy and returned to the inn before she was discovered!

Now Nancy flashed Emily a warning glance and answered, "Had an interesting date."

Emily caught on quickly. She turned to Carl Bard. "It's all right. This is Nancy Drew."

The guard nodded. "I'm convinced. But—"

Before he had a chance to say anything more, Nancy said with emphasis, "I'll explain everything *later."*

The man shrugged, said good night, and left.

"Did you have a good time this evening, Nancy?" asked Emily with a twinkle.

"I always do," Nancy replied airily, for Maud's benefit.

Just then a pleasant voice broke in, "Somebody arriving at this late hour?"

Dick Farnham came forward to join them. Emily smilingly introduced her fiancé to Nancy,

"I certainly appreciate all you've done to help us," Dick told Nancy. "It's a lucky thing you came to Lilac Inn."

"Now we'd all better get some rest," Emily said, and everyone agreed.

Nancy was first to reach the stairway. As she stepped up, her foot caught in the hem of her gown. She stumbled, and the black wig fell from her sleeve to the floor.

Maud glared at it. "Hm!" she said disdainfully. "Have you been up to some sleuthing trick?"

The secret of Nancy having masqueraded on the grounds was likely to be guessed by this busybody!

CHAPTER XIV

Earthquake Scare

"TIRED of being a blonde, Nancy?" Maud asked sarcastically. "Or are you the mysterious ghost of Lilac Inn?"

Emily, although at first surprised, sensed that Nancy had used the wig for a good reason. With a wink at Dick, she said, "Nonsense. I'll bet Nancy's date took her to a masquerade dance."

The young sleuth was grateful for Emily's quick thinking. Nancy waited for another outburst from Maud, but none came. Instead, the unpleasant woman said in a bored tone, "I think masquerades are so childish. Well, I'm going to bed." She said good night and went upstairs.

Nancy now turned to the engaged couple. "Are you both too tired to stay up a little longer?"

Dick grinned. "Not if I'm going to hear why one of Emily's pretty bridesmaids-to-be is masquerading as Cinderella. Tell me, Nancy, is it a new style to wear flashlights on your dress sleeves?"

"What!" Emily cried, and examined Nancy's sleeves. "Why, Nancy, what on earth *have* you been up to?"

"Can we talk some place where we won't be overheard?" Nancy requested. Dick led the way to his office.

Once inside, Nancy told of her sleuthing activities and experiences that day and night. "I'm glad you helped me along with that 'dance' story, Emily. Only Dad and the guard and you two know where I've been."

Dick spoke up earnestly, "You might be risking your life for us, Nancy. Lilac Inn isn't worth that."

Nancy set her jaw. "I must outwit my impersonator before she outwits me. And if I do, I'm positive I'll solve the mysteries of this place, too."

Dick nodded understandingly. He said Emily had told him of all the odd happenings at Lilac Inn.

"I also explained to Dick about my fear that Maud has some hold over Aunt Hazel," Emily said, adding that she hesitated to ask her aunt outright unless necessary.

"Of course," Nancy said. "Mrs. Willoughby is upset as it is."

Emily said grimly, "If I find out Maud is threatening my aunt, she'll regret it!"

The three young people started upstairs once more. On the way, Nancy asked if Mary Mason and the gardeners had brought references when they came to Lilac Inn.

"Why, yes," Emily answered. "But at the time, Dick and I were so busy with work here, we didn't check them until later. They seemed all right."

The trio said good night, and Nancy entered her room. Helen was sleeping soundly, and did not awaken. It seemed to the young sleuth that her own eyes had just closed when she was awakened by Helen calling her name frantically.

"Nancy! Nancy! Wake up! There's an earthquake!"

"What?" Nancy sat up in bed. As she did the startled girl noticed that her bed was indeed

shaking slightly.

"Quick!" Helen urged. "Let's get out of here before the ceilings fall down!"

As the girls ran to the hall, they met Dick, Emily, Mr. Daly, Mrs. Willoughby, and Maud. All cried out that they too had felt the vibrations, which now had ceased.

"This is very strange," Dick said. "This isn't earthquake territory."

On a hunch, Nancy suggested they telephone the Benton State Police and find out if the tremors were widespread. Dick made the call and with a puzzled expression reported that apparently the disturbance was confined to Lilac Inn.

Maud shrieked, "The building's falling apartt We'd better get out of here!"

"Go if you want to," Emily said sharply. "But the shaking has stopped and the building is still intact."

"I'll make an investigation," Dick offered. "There may be something wrong with the foundation." He suggested that Nancy and Mr. Daly accompany him to the cellar. "The rest of you wait here."

None of the three discovered anything out of the ordinary in the basement.

Nancy smiled in relief. "Instead of falling down, this building seems to be unusually sturdy."

Mr. Daly, however, was extremely nervous. "This has never happened before," he said. "Dick, I strongly advise you to give up the inn. It's—it's just not safe here any more."

Emily's fiancé shook his head, saying that he, like Nancy, was more determined than ever to solve the mysteries at Lilac Inn. The trio went back to the second floor and reassured the others.

"Are you all sure you never felt a similar vibration before?" Dick asked. "Shaking like that used to happen to our house when a very heavy truck went by."

"Maybe that's what happened this time," Helen said philosophically. "Let's go back to bed."

Nancy was not convinced by this explanation. Remembering the explosion and fire caused by the time bomb, she wondered if someone had planted an explosive underground to try to destroy or at least weaken Lilac Inn.

"Nancy," said Helen, when the girls were once more in bed, "why did you change your mind and come back to the inn tonight?"

When she heard about Nancy's masquerade in the lilac grove and its results, she praised her friend. "Next time, though, don't try such a risky thing alone," Helen scolded.

Nancy was almost asleep when a sudden thought struck her. Why had the "ghost" been titian-haired this time, instead of brunette?

When the girls went into the dining room the next morning, the other young people, Maud, and Mrs. Willoughby were already eating.

"Welcome back, Nancy," said John, grinning. "How's my beautiful sleuthing skin diver?"

"Ready to flip!" gibed Nancy.

Maud looked up from her grapefruit. "Will you go skin diving with a wig on?" she asked with an attempt to be facetious.

Nancy was slightly annoyed but gave no sign of this. She hoped Maud had not spread word around the inn of the wig episode.

Breakfast over, Nancy returned her car to the parking lot and then sought out Emily privately. She asked whether Maud had been gossiping about events of the previous evening. Emily said she was sure this was the case.

"Tell me, Emily," Nancy said, "how much do you know of Maud's background?"

"Very little. Only that Aunt Hazel met her about a year ago at a social gathering in River Heights. They became friendly. The next thing I heard was that Maud was going out West. Then, about a month ago, she showed up here. Aunt Hazel thought she would make a good

social director, and Dick and I engaged her."

"Maud *can* be pleasant," Nancy commented, "and she does have musical talent. I really can't figure her out." To herself, Nancy conjectured on the possibility of Maud's using her position as a cover-up.

The young detective left the inn presently to do some sleuthing in the lilac grove. She met John part way there.

"I didn't want to mention it at breakfast, Nancy," he said, "but I'd like to see the exact site of your masquerade. Emily and Dick told me a little about it."

"I'll be glad to show you." Nancy led him to the lilac grove. She described vividly her encounter with her double. John listened intently.

"Nancy, you were in a dangerous spot. Maybe it's a lucky thing Carl Bard scared your impersonator away."

Nancy did not agree. "The sooner she is caught, the better. I must say, she does look much like me. I don't wonder you were fooled."

John laughed. "I think I wouldn't make the same mistake again. I much prefer the real Nancy."

Nancy blushed at his compliment. As the two looked about the lilac grove, Nancy saw a tiny object glinting in the sun. She picked it up. The object was of steel and shaped something like a can opener, except that there was a tiny wheel at the end.

"What's this?" she asked John.

He took the little device and stared at it. "I know where it belongs," he said. "I'll return it."

John put the object in his pocket, and Nancy had the feeling he had deliberately evaded her question.

"I wonder if there are any distinguishing footprints," he said, changing the subject.

Nancy frowned as she looked at the soft earth. There *was* a print—a peculiar one which she recognized—clearly outlined. It had been made by a skin diver's flipper. Nancy's mind flashed back to the night before, when she had left for the lilac grove. John's cottage had been dark. Maybe he had been sleeping. If not, where had he been?

"John," she said, looking the young man squarely in the eye, "were you skin diving last night?"

CHAPTER XV

The Underwater Rescue

JOHN McBRIDE looked startled at Nancy's sudden query. "No, I wasn't skin diving," he said, returning the girl's direct look. "Why?"

Nancy pointed to the marks on the ground. "They're flipper prints," she said. "There must be more! The jeep tread and these prints have to start and end some place."

John knelt down and studied the prints. "From the size, I'd judge these were made by a man."

Nancy suddenly recalled the similar prints she had seen and the distant sound of a motorboat she heard as she had approached the grove the previous night. She told John of this. "Perhaps," she said, "whoever wore the flippers was to meet my impersonator and leave by boat."

"Or perhaps the diver was aboard but got out of the boat away from shore and swam underwater to avoid being detected," John guessed.

Nancy nodded and thought, "If this is the case, it eliminates Maud Potter as a participant in the rendezvous."

Nancy's mind flitted over possible suspects. One of the gardeners? He could easily have skin-diving equipment without anyone knowing it.

As Nancy and John walked toward the river, following the flipper treads, she asked, "John, do you know what 'blue pipes' are?"

"Sure. Lilacs," he said matter-of-factly.

Nancy hesitated, then revealed her theory about the term being a code or a signal. "It could even mean Lilac Inn."

He raised his eyebrows in amazement. "Wow! Some shrewd deducing!" he exclaimed.

John stopped suddenly and grasped Nancy's arm. As the girl stared at him in surprise, he said excitedly, "Nancy! You've given me a terrific idea! I can't explain until—well, someday you'll understand."

Nancy's curiosity was piqued. She naturally did not ask John what he meant. But she was certain that he was tackling some secret problem. What was it?

By now the couple had reached the river. John pointed out three flipper prints in soft dirt patches along the bank.

Nancy scanned the area. "I'd like to have a look underwater here," she said. "John, would you like to make a skin-diving date?"

John grinned. "You couldn't keep me ashore."

The two returned to the inn. Nancy went first to the phone and called her father. Since she did not want to mention specific details in case someone was eavesdropping, she merely told him that "last night's meeting was most interesting."

"I understand," Mr. Drew said.

"Also, Dad, is it all right if I go skin diving? John will accompany me."

Mr. Drew gave his permission. "Perhaps you'll see some unusual fish," he added meaningfully.

"Could be, Dad. I'll let you know."

After Nancy had said good-by, she and John confided their plan and the reason for it to Helen, Emily, and Dick.

"All right," said Emily worriedly, "but watch out for spear throwers."

Soon Nancy and John, ready for skin diving, were back at the riverbank. They had decided to search underwater from the area of the flipper prints to the place Nancy had spotted the sharklike object.

They adjusted their face plates and tanks, and then they descended. Down—down they went, finally reaching the muddy bottom.

Their eyes darted here and there, observing schools of little fish; but nothing out of the ordinary came to sight. Nancy and John continued on, until they reached the place where Nancy had been before. They linked hands and walked cautiously along the river bottom.

Nancy pointed out the rocky overhang from which she had seen the shark shape projecting, John nodded.

To Nancy's disappointment, there was no sign of anything resembling the mysterious object. What had it been, she puzzled? A sunken boat that might have since drifted away?

Suddenly John stumbled and dropped Nancy's hand. Startled, she saw that his foot was wedged between two rocks obscured by weeds. He bent down and tugged, but to no avail.

At once Nancy went to his assistance. First, she pulled away the plant life surrounding the rocks. Then gently she tried to ease John's foot loose. It would not budge.

Nancy worked desperately to dislodge one of the rocks. Finally, with John's help, she succeeded in moving one of the stones. John's foot was free!

Exhausted, the couple rose to the surface and swam toward shore, gulping in fresh air. As soon as they sat down on the bank, John thanked Nancy for coming to his rescue. "You're a wonderful partner to have around, Nancy—sleuthing or skin diving," he said.

Nancy smiled. "Thanks, John. Let's have a look at your foot and see if it's injured."

John sighed. "Yes, Nurse."

They found that his foot was merely scraped. He and Nancy went underwater again to do some more sleuthing. But they uncovered nothing suspicious. Baffled, they swam back to their starting point and walked toward the inn.

On the way, Nancy saw Gil Gary trimming a hedge nearby. She and John went over to him.

"Do you happen to know anyone else around here who skin-dives, Gil?" Nancy asked.

The gardener did not look up, and continued his trimming. "Naw," he muttered. "River bottom's too muddy. It—"

He broke off. Nancy felt a surge of excitement. Why did Gil assume she was referring to the river? And did he know of its muddy condition from personal experience? Why had he not finished his answer?

"I suppose," she said, "some people prefer to travel by canoe." Nancy looked directly at the dock where one of the inn's canoes was tied up.

"S'pose so," Gil replied shortly.

John now stepped forward. "By the way, Gil, have you or Hank noticed any more tools missing lately?"

"Naw." The gardener shook his head.

John shrugged casually. "Just wondered, because Miss Drew and I came across a funny gadget this morning. Sort of like a can opener. Sound familiar?"

"No!" the gardener snapped. He flung his shears to the ground. "I'm goin' for lunch," he said, and retreated hastily.

Nancy and John exchanged triumphant glances. "He's nervous about something, all right," John said.

"He certainly doesn't act like an innocent person," Nancy reasoned.

There was just time before luncheon for Nancy and John to report in private to their three young friends.

When Dick heard of the gardener's reaction to Nancy's queries, he frowned. "Maybe I should have a talk with him myself," he said.

Nancy advised against this action for the present. "If Gil is connected with the diamond theft, we may learn through him who else is involved," she pointed out. "And, perhaps, the identity of my double."

"You mean, all the culprits might be trapped at once?" Helen asked, and Nancy nodded.

As Nancy sat down at the table with the others, Jean came over. "Thanks again for the ride, Miss Drew," she said in her shy way. "It was real helpful."

At this moment Maud Potter entered the room. Jean quickly bent over and whispered to Nancy, "Don't forget! Watch out for that trouble-maker."

Nancy did not know what to think. She disliked Maud, but felt it was unfair to accept Jean's claim without proof. "Don't trust an informer too far," her father had once said.

The social director took her place. Looking at Emily, she announced, "Your aunt has a splitting headache and won't be down."

"Oh, poor dear." Emily jumped up. "I'll go see—"

"I wouldn't disturb her," Maud interrupted officiously. "She'll feel better after some rest."

Emily's eyes blazed. "If I want to see my aunt, Maud, I shall. I'm sick and tired of your meddling. Dick and I are paying you to be social director—and—and nothing else!"

There was dead silence at the girl's outburst. Then Maud gasped. "Well! That's all the thanks I get."

"Thanks for what!" Emily stormed. "Keeping Aunt Hazel under your thumb and being unpleasant to my guests?"

By now everyone in the dining room—waitresses and patrons—were staring in Emily's direction. Dick tried to intervene. "Em, calm down," he begged. "We'll discuss it later."

But Emily, overwrought, paid no attention. "I don't care. I'll give up Lilac Inn rather than see Aunt Hazel unhappy. I wouldn't be surprised, Maud Potter, if you're responsible for the awful things that have happened here!"

An almost bewildered look came over Maud's flushed face. She started to protest, "I most certainly did not—"

Emily did not allow her to finish. "Furthermore," the girl went on, "I'm going to notify the police about all my suspicions regarding the diamonds immediately."

At this point Nancy happened to notice that Jean Holmes was taking in the scene with avid interest. For a fleeting moment the sleuth detected a hard, calculating look replacing Jean's usually shy expression. But the next moment the waitress picked up a tray and went toward the kitchen.

In the meantime, Maud had also risen. "By all means call the police. It's about time they learn the truth," she said, with a scornful glance at Nancy. Declaring she had lost her appetite, the woman left the room.

Pale and trembling, Emily sat down. "I'm sorry," she said weakly. "I just couldn't take Maud's arrogance another minute."

"I don't blame you," Helen spoke up sympathetically, then whispered, "At least Maud didn't act as if she were mixed up with the theft of the diamonds."

"That's right," Dick conceded. "But where do we go from here? Unless this mystery's cleared up, we may not be able to open the inn in July. Also," he added glumly, "Emily and I might have to postpone our wedding."

"Oh, no!" Emily wailed.

Dick said he could foresee no other course of action. His funds were low, and if he and Emily were to make a success of the resort, the necessary outdoor work must be completed. A

pool and tennis courts, yet to be built, had been especially featured in his publicity campaign.

"I've already mailed out thousands of brochures," he said.

"Yes, and we're booked almost solid for summer reservations," Emily said unhappily. "Oh, Nancy, what shall we do? I hate to give up hope of getting my diamonds back."

Nancy replied firmly, *"I'm* not giving up. If you agree, Emily and Dick, there are a few more angles of this case I want to investigate. And if you don't mind, I'd like to tell Lieutenant Brice the whole story."

The engaged couple readily consented. "Nothing matters now except finding out the truth," Emily said.

After lunch Nancy drove to Benton. For privacy, she telephoned the State Police officer from a booth in the drugstore there. When Nancy had finished her account, he assured her he would do all he could to turn up possible new leads to Nancy's impersonator. Then Nancy called Chief McGinnis. The typed envelope, he said, had brought no results.

"I'll confer with Lieutenant Brice about happenings at Lilac Inn. By the way, no luck yet in finding the stolen truck."

Nancy's next call was to her father. Mr. Drew confessed alarm upon hearing the details of his daughter's meeting with her double. "No telling what she and her accomplices may be up to," he warned. "But whatever you do, Nancy, don't overstep anyone's legal rights."

"I'll remember."

By the time Nancy returned to the inn, it was late afternoon. The sky had filled with black clouds, and the air was close and oppressive. "There's going to be a thunderstorm," Nancy thought as she entered the lobby.

No one was in sight. But just then Mr. Daly came from his office. He said that nothing had been found to account for the quakelike vibrations.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Daly," Nancy said, "that the cause is man-made. How, I don't know yet."

The former owner of the inn was shocked. "To think this fine building must endure such treatment!" He told Nancy that the inn had been built in 1760 by an English family, and had catered to both stagecoach and river travelers. The inn had passed from one generation of the original family to the next. "Some people said that Lilac Inn was a refuge for slaves who had escaped from the South."

"Maybe that's why the secret room was built," Nancy remarked. "Who owned the inn previous to you?" she asked.

"A Spaniard named Ron Carioca who'd lived in the West Indies. It was he who planted the beautiful lilac tree—for good luck—outside the front entrance."

Just then Mr. Daly's phone rang, and he excused himself to answer it. Nancy walked on into the dining room and looked out the bay window. The sky was getting darker each minute.

"Oh, hello, Miss Drew." The voice was Jean Holmes'. She carried a large vase filled with yellow iris and reddish-purple lilacs, which she set on the window sill.

"You seem to like flowers, Jean," Nancy observed. "That's a pretty combination: iris and 'blue pipes.' "

" 'Blue pipes'?" Jean echoed. "What made you use that expression?"

"It's different," Nancy said nonchalantly.

Did the waitress seem suddenly ill at ease, or was it Nancy's imagination? Before the young sleuth could decide, there was a loud clap of thunder, followed by the banging of several shutters. As Jean and Mr. Daly hurried to shut the dining-room windows, Nancy saw John and Dick dash across the side lawn toward the inn.

Rain came pouring down in silvery sheets. There was another resounding thunderclap, then a vivid flash of lightning. A splintering, crashing sound followed.

"Oh!" Jean shrieked. "The inn's been struck!"

CHAPTER XVI

A Letter

THE crash had come from the front of the inn. Everyone raced through the lobby to peer outside.

"Oh!" Nancy cried. "The historic lilac tree is down."

The lovely "tree of good fortune" had fallen onto the lawn, splintered and charred.

"More bad luck!" Emily said mournfully.

Suddenly Maud burst out, "This is the last straw! I'm fed up with a place full of thieves, weird noises, bombs, a trembling building—I quit."

She turned a scathing look on Mrs. Willoughby. "You got me into this. Thanks for nothing! I've found a better job on my own!"

Emily's face was expressionless as Maud snapped open her purse and fumbled through its contents. She drew out a letter and flourished it.

"This is an offer of a position I received today from the Hotel Claymore in River Heights. I've already accepted it," Maud stated. "Emily, I didn't go to the employment agency just to find you a waitress, but to find a *decent* job for myself. But I asked the manager not to say I had been there."

With dignity Emily said, "Maud, Dick will write a check for whatever salary we owe you."

With a triumphant air Maud marched upstairs. Emily looked around anxiously. The waitresses and cooks had gathered in a corner of the hall. Obviously they had not missed a word of what had been said.

Nancy sensed what her friend was thinking: that the employees were probably suspicious about the fire. Now that Maud had mentioned the bomb, all of them might become alarmed enough to give notice. Prospects for Lilac Inn's success would indeed be dim.

"I must help Em and Dick before it's too late," Nancy told herself determinedly.

As the rain abated and the sky began to brighten, the men went outside to examine the fallen lilac. Nancy now turned to Mrs. Willoughby, who seemed almost in a daze. "Perhaps you'd better sit down and rest," she said kindly.

Emily's aunt gave a great sigh. "I will. Please come with me to Emily's office," she asked the three girls.

When they were seated, Emily said, "Aunt Hazel, was Maud Potter threatening you in some way?"

"I'm afraid so," Mrs. Willoughby replied wearily. "Actually I believe she wouldn't have carried it out. But I couldn't be sure—"

To the girls' dismay, the woman broke down and sobbed. Nancy patted her shoulder. "Won't you tell us about it?"

Regaining composure, Mrs. Willoughby nodded. "I feel terrible. When I brought Maud here, I thought I was helping Emily and Dick. But it's turned out just the opposite.

"Anyhow," she went on, "I met Maud a year ago at a party in River Heights. We became friendly—attended the theater and so forth. Maud seemed very pleasant and good company at the time. And I also felt sorry for her."

"Sorry?" Helen echoed.

Mrs. Willoughby explained that Maud's husband had died several years before, leaving her penniless. Since then, she had worked at various resorts, but not very long at any one.

"When Maud heard about Lilac Inn, she persuaded me that, with her experience, she'd be ideal as social director. But soon after her arrival here, she asked me to lend her a large sum of money—claimed to have a lot of unpaid bills which her salary wouldn't cover. Maud became angry when I refused, but she continued her demands for money."

Emily interrupted, "Aunt Hazel, why didn't you tell us she was bothering you? Dick would have asked her to leave."

"Maud insinuated that if I tried to force her to leave, she would say that—that *I* had stolen your diamonds, Emily, by getting them from the bank weeks ago, and substituting the fake stones!"

"How dreadful!" Nancy cried out, and Emily added fiercely, "That awful woman! But, Aunt Hazel, we never would have believed her."

"I know," Mrs. Willoughby said ruefully. "But with so many strange things happening, I guess I wasn't thinking logically."

Nancy had one more question to clear up regarding Maud Potter. She decided to mention Jean Holmes' warning about the woman.

"Did any of you notice Maud going into our cottage the day of the fire?" Nancy asked. "Or our room here?"

No one had. Furthermore, Mrs. Willoughby added, "I believe Jean must have been mistaken. When Maud wasn't with us, she stayed in her room typing. She probably was writing letters of application."

Presently Nancy excused herself, saying she wanted to take a walk and do some thinking. Once outside, she took a trail toward the river. Drops of rain still sparkled on the foliage.

Nancy's thoughts reverted to Jean's story about Maud. "It sounds as though the waitress might not have been telling the truth. But why would she want to incriminate Maud? And why did Jean appear so uneasy when I mentioned 'blue pipes'?"

The young sleuth suddenly roused from her concentration on the puzzle and became aware of an interesting, gnarled apple tree along the riverbank. Just then she noticed an envelope stuck in a crotch of the tree.

Nancy picked up the damp envelope, wondering if it had blown there during the storm or been placed in the crotch, perhaps for someone to find. There was no stamp or address on the envelope, only a name—Miss Lillie Merriweather.

Suddenly Nancy's eye was caught by the fact that in the typed name the letter *a* was very faint. This, as well as the rest of the typing, reminded Nancy suddenly of the envelope found with her charge plate.

"I wonder if they were done on the same machine!" she thought excitedly.

The flap of the envelope had become unsealed from dampness and the girl slid the letter out easily. A pink lilac spray adorned the top left corner of the stationery. A message below it, all typed, read:

Dear Lillie:

I hope we can get together soon. I've been busy lining up an important job. Give my best to your dad. Tell him I have a beautiful blue pipe for him. Hope to see you soon.

Hastily, but with love,

Gay

Nancy's heart was thumping with excitement. Lilacs—"blue pipes"—two envelopes bearing the same type—was someone named *Gay* her impersonator?

"The name Lillie Merriweather sounds vaguely familiar," the girl detective thought.

Hastily she slid the letter back into the envelope and put it in the tree. She would alert the

police to watch for anyone returning to look for the letter.

As Nancy hurried back to the inn, she recalled Mrs. Willoughby saying that Maud Potter had been typing. By some chance was the director still a possible suspect in the mystery? Was she the person who had typed the envelope containing Nancy's charge plate?

"I'll check," Nancy determined. She went upstairs and knocked on Maud's bedroom door. It was flung open by the director.

"Yes?" she snapped.

"May I come in?" Nancy asked.

Grudgingly, Maud allowed Nancy to enter and the detective saw that a suitcase was nearly packed. On a desk stood Maud's typewriter, with a blank piece of paper in the roller.

"Well, Nancy, what do *you* want?" Maud asked.

Watching the woman closely, Nancy queried, "Have you heard from Gay or Lillie lately?"

"What?" Maud appeared flabbergasted. "I don't know any Gay or Lillie. Now stop quizzing me as if I had done something criminal."

"I suppose," Nancy said icily, "that practically blackmailing Mrs. Willoughby isn't?"

To her surprise, Maud burst into tears. Between sobs she told Nancy that she had never intended to carry out her threat. "I don't know why I did it. Hazel has been very good to me. I guess I've just been upset and worried about money ever since my husband's death."

Nancy could not help feeling a little sorry for the woman. Nevertheless, she asked, "Do you know anything about the time bomb that was set off in my cottage?"

"No!" Maud looked shocked. Nancy was sure she was telling the truth. "I've been jealous of you, Nancy," she admitted, "but I'd never do anyone physical harm."

As Maud dried her eyes, Nancy walked toward the desk. Nonchalantly she typed out her name on the typewriter. *N-a-n-c-y.* All the letters were clearly defined. The suspicious envelopes had definitely not been typed on this machine.

She turned to Maud, wished her good luck in her new position, and left. Then Nancy went downstairs and told Helen, Dick, and the Willoughbys about the letter and her interview with Maud. "I'm convinced that Maud won't cause any more trouble," she stated. "And now, if you'll keep everyone out of earshot of the phone, I'll call the State Police and suggest they watch for Gay."

Nancy had just finished her conversation when Maud Potter came downstairs. She looked ashamed, and said she would not accept the check Dick offered her. She asked him to use the money for work on the resort. A few minutes later the ex-director left in a taxi.

Suddenly everyone was startled by Mr. Daly rushing frantically from his office.

"Gracious! What's the matter?" Mrs. Willoughby asked him.

"My blue pipe's missing! Has anyone seen it?"

"Do you mean the one you were carving from lilac wood?" Nancy asked.

Mr. Daly nodded, saying he had just completed work on the pipe a few hours ago. He had searched everywhere for it. Although. the pipe was of no great value, he had promised it to a friend. No one present had seen the hand-carved piece.

"Why would anyone take it?" Helen puzzled.

At that moment Nancy recalled the wording of Gay's letter. "Tell him I have a beautiful blue pipe for him." Could Gay possibly have referred to Mr. Daly's pipe, and she, or some accomplice, have stolen it for Lillie's Dad? If so, Gay was certainly familiar with Lilac Inn and its occupants.

At that moment Nancy glanced into the dining room. Jean Holmes was setting tables for supper. Suddenly Nancy had a vivid recollection of the shy waitress staring at Mr. Daly's pipe while he had been showing it to Nancy. Could Jean have stolen it for Gay? But for what reason?

Saying nothing of her speculations, Nancy asked her friends if the name Lillie Merriweather meant anything to them.

"There's an actress named Lillie Merriweather," Helen spoke up. "She plays bit roles on Broadway. I think now she has parts mostly in stock theaters throughout the country."

"That's right," said Mr. Daly. "In fact, I read that she's with a stock company in Bridgeton, about seventy-five miles from here."

"Helen, let's drive to Bridgeton tomorrow!" Nancy proposed excitedly. "I have a hunch Lillie Merriweather can tell us something about the mystery at Lilac Inn!"

CHAPTER XVII

The Net Tightens

HELEN eagerly agreed to go with Nancy to call on Lillie Merriweather, the actress. “It would be fun even if there weren’t a mystery,” she said.

A little later Lieutenant Brice arrived at the inn with another trooper. In Dick’s office Nancy told him about Gay’s letter and the spot near which she had found it.

“We’ll keep watch,” the officer promised. He took the other trooper aside and whispered instructions. The man nodded and left.

Lieutenant Brice then told Nancy and her friends that no clues had been discovered to the person who had placed the time bomb.

“There was an unusual silencer on it, however,” he said. “That’s why you didn’t hear the ticking, Nancy, until a short time before the bomb was due to explode.”

The officer also said that besides the red panel truck, several other cars in the area had been stolen. “Some of the vehicles have been recovered, but there’s still no sign of the red truck. We’ll keep looking,” the lieutenant promised as he left.

Sunday morning Nancy and Helen were up early for church and their trip to Bridgeton. After breakfast the girls went to the parking lot. To their astonishment, Nancy’s convertible was not there!

“Good night!” Nancy exclaimed. Rapidly she searched her handbag for the key. It was not there. “I must have left the key in the ignition!” she chided herself.

Helen groaned. “Your car probably was stolen by one of those thieves!”

Just then, John McBride drove into the Tot in his jeep. “Hi!” he greeted the girls. “Why so glum?”

When Nancy told about her missing car, John suggested that he and the girls go off in his jeep and search the grounds before reporting the loss,

“Your car may only have been hidden by a prankster,” he suggested. “This is the day for car trouble,” he added. “I just fixed a flat tire.”

Twenty minutes later the group spotted Nancy’s convertible near a cornfield across the lane from the orchard. They examined the vehicle, and found it intact. The key was in the lock.

“Whoever took it had a short trip,” John commented.

Nancy wondered whether the unknown driver had only played a prank. If so, why? To discourage her from going to Bridgeton? Or had the person planned to steal the car but been scared off?

The girls stepped into the convertible and told John their destination. “Lots of luck,” he said.

The drive to Bridgeton took about an hour and a half. Nancy and Helen arrived in time to attend services in the quaint, white, eighteenth-century church. Then they had lunch at a tearoom.

“Where do we look for Miss Merriweather?” asked Helen as they paid their check. “The theater’s closed today.”

Nancy asked the tearoom manager where the summer stock people were living.

“At the Montrose Hotel, two blocks down.”

Ten minutes later the girls walked into the small hotel. They learned from the desk clerk that the actress and her father had Suite 303.

As Nancy and Helen rode up in the elevator, they reviewed a plan they had worked out earlier. To avoid rousing suspicion, Nancy would pretend to be an actress named Dru Gruen. She would further pretend that she knew Gay but had lost contact. Helen was to pose as a dancer.

As the young sleuth knocked on the door of Suite 303, she was filled with anticipation. Would the visit yield the answer to the mystery, or would it prove to be only a false lead?

The door was opened by a tall, slim young woman, with silver-blond hair. She wore a becoming dress of jade-green silk.

"Yes?" she asked in a throaty voice.

Nancy smiled. "Miss Merriweather? I'm Dru Gruen, an actress, and this is my friend Helga Marsh, a dancer. I understand you know Gay. We're trying to locate her."

The actress looked startled. "Gay Moreau?"

"Yes," Nancy replied without hesitation.

Miss Merriweather invited her callers into an attractive living room. A fine-looking elderly man arose from a chair as they entered.

"Papa," said the actress, "these young ladies are theater people—Miss Gruen and Miss Marsh. They're looking for Gay."

Mr. Merriweather, too, appeared startled. "We haven't seen Gay in quite some time," he said. "May I ask why you're trying to find her?"

"We thought we'd like to have a little reunion," Nancy explained. "We haven't seen Gay recently, and don't know her present address."

"We don't know where she's living, either," Lillie put in. "I haven't heard from Gay since the last time I saw her."

"When was that?" Nancy asked.

"Shortly after she was released from prison."

Nancy and Helen were amazed to hear this. But they managed to conceal it.

"I imagine," Nancy said carefully, "that Gay's been having a hard time."

Lillie and her father agreed. "Very sad." Mr. Merriweather sighed. "Gay had talent. But a five-year sentence for check forgery doesn't help one's career."

"I can't understand why she did it," Nancy said.

"Probably because Gay was poor most of her life," Lillie reminisced. "Once success came her way, she spent all her earnings on luxuries. But Gay couldn't stop buying expensive things. I guess she figured forgery was the easiest way to get more money."

Mr. Merriweather frowned. "What bothered me was that Gay swore revenge on the person who was instrumental in having her sent to prison."

"The one whose signature she forged?" Helen asked.

"She didn't mention the name," replied Lillie's father.

"How old is Gay now?" Nancy inquired.

"About twenty-seven," Lillie answered.

"I wonder," Nancy pursued, "if she still likes 'blue pipes'?"

"Oh! Gay must've told you that means lilacs!" Lillie exclaimed. "She certainly was crazy about them—even wore lilac colors."

"Say!" Mr. Merriweather exclaimed. "I wonder if Gay sent me the pipe made of lilac wood I received yesterday. There was no return address on the package, and the postmark was blurred—must've gotten wet."

When he showed the pipe to Nancy, she could scarcely hide her excitement. The pipe looked exactly like Mr. Daly's! But she asked Lillie in an offhand way if Gay had ever spoken of Lilac Inn,

"Why, yes," the actress replied. "If you mean the old place in Benton that Gay said she visited as a child, when the inn was owned by a relative of hers—someone who'd lived in the West Indies."

"He was a Spaniard, I believe," Nancy put in, "named Ron Carioca."

"That sounds right," Lillie said.

Mr. Merriweather spoke up, "You might find Gay in Benton. Maybe she went back for old times' sake."

"A good idea. We'll look there," Helen said.

Nancy sighed. "I suppose she's changed quite a bit since—her imprisonment."

Lillie shook her head. "Surprisingly, no. I'll show you." The actress went to a table and picked up a scrapbook of clippings. She thumbed through the pages and pointed out a recent magazine picture of an attractive model with golden hair, "This is Gay. Looks just like her."

The young sleuth studied the picture. It struck her there was something familiar about Gay's eyes.

The two girls thanked the Merriweathers and left. They got into the car and headed for Benton. Elatedly, Nancy and Helen discussed everything they had learned—Gay's last name, the fact that she had been in prison, and her childhood association with Lilac Inn.

"Do you think she *is* your double, Nancy?" asked Helen. "There's a resemblance. Besides, being an actress, Gay knows how to use make-up skillfully."

"Yes. Also, the color of her hair is similar to mine," Nancy added.

"But," said Helen, "I can't understand why Gay decided to impersonate you in the first place."

"I'm inclined to think it had nothing to do with the mystery of Lilac Inn in the beginning," Nancy replied. "She wanted clothes and jewelry, so took my charge plate. But later she decided to use the disguise to keep John and me from our skin-diving trip."

"You mean Gay was at the inn?"

"Yes. Under an assumed name, of course."

Helen grinned at the young sleuth. "And next you're going to tell me who she was. Well, one person she *couldn't* have been was Mary Mason. You saw her in Dockville, and said she's heavier and older than you."

Nancy pursed her lips. "I never checked the description of *that* Mary Mason with Emily. She may not have been the Mary who worked at the inn, but was in league with her, and was asked to pose as Mary Mason, waitress."

Helen was amazed. "Nancy, you're a whiz. Gay and Mary probably are the same person."

"That's what I suspect, Helen. First, we'll check with Emily."

When the girls reached the inn, they questioned Emily. "Now that I think of it, Nancy," Emily said, "Mary Mason *was* about your height and weight, and her coloring's like yours."

"That settles it," said the young sleuth. "I'm going to talk to Chief McGinnis immediately." With her friends covering the extension phones, Nancy told him of her suspicions.

"You've certainly made great progress, Nancy," he praised her. "I'll ask the Dockville police to get a line on the Mary Mason you talked to there."

"Thank you," said Nancy, then she called her father. Hannah said that Mr. Drew had gone out to dinner with a client, so Nancy asked the housekeeper to give him a message.

"Of course. Have you solved the mystery?" Hannah inquired hopefully.

Nancy said not yet, but to tell her father that she had an important clue to her impersonator. "Ask him to call me at the inn, please."

Hannah promised to do so, and said that she hoped to hear the whole story soon. At supper-time John was not present at the table. Helen asked nonchalantly where he was.

"John said he had an errand to do," Dick replied.

When the meal was over, Nancy encountered Jean Holmes in the center hall. "If anyone should phone me, will you please call me," she requested. "I'm going outside for a walk."

"I'll be glad to, Miss Drew," said the waitress.

Actually Nancy wanted to find Carl Bard and ask the guard if he had seen anything suspicious or obtained any clue to her double. She met him coming toward the inn to supper.

"No, I haven't," he replied to her questions. "It's been very quiet here."

Nancy thanked him and walked off. She strolled through the grounds, thinking over the day's events. Who had used her car? Had John any idea as to the driver's identity? Was it the person responsible for the flipper tracks John had examined several days ago in the orchard?

Nancy continued toward the water reflectively, but did look back, wondering if by chance anyone might be following her. Suddenly she saw Jean Holmes emerge from the kitchen door of the inn. No one else was in sight.

"She's probably looking for me," Nancy thought. "Chief McGinnis or Dad must have phoned."

Nancy expected Jean to call out her name, but she did not do so. The young sleuth was about to hail the girl when she noticed that Jean was carrying a small suitcase. She glanced furtively from left to right, then headed for the river. Some instinct caused Nancy to duck behind a large oak. Jean reached the water and turned right. Nancy stealthily followed the waitress.

The other girl walked on quickly until she reached the lilac grove. Then she slipped through an opening in the bushes.

Curious, Nancy decided to keep shadowing the waitress. The trail led Nancy upstream along the river for about half a mile. Presently Jean approached a dilapidated building. She entered the partially open, sagging front door.

As Nancy crept forward, she looked about her constantly. Suddenly she stifled a scream. A grotesque shape was emerging from the river!

The apparition had stubby back fins and a bulging glassed-in prow. It was about fifteen feet long and painted a somber blue.

Then recognition struck Nancy full force. "That's the 'shark' I saw underwater—a miniature submarine!"

Fascinated, she watched the craft glide into a cove adjacent to the shed. A moment later a man's hand lifted back the glassed-in section and a figure in skin-diving gear stepped to the ground.

Before Nancy could decide what to do, she was grabbed from behind and a rough hand was clapped over her mouth!

CHAPTER XVIII

A Submarine Prisoner

NANCY struggled but could not free herself or see her captor as she was pushed toward the shack. A cloth had been tied over her mouth. Once inside the dilapidated building, she blinked in astonished disbelief.

Jean Holmes stood peering into what looked like a cellar! Gil Gary, the gardener, was holding open a trap door to the opening!

Jean and Gil stared at Nancy and her captor. “Well, Nancy Drew, the detective!” Jean’s voice was no longer shy, but strident. “Where did you find her, Frank?”

“Spying, was she?” Gil added.

“She sure was,” said the man called Frank. The young detective observed that he was about fifty years old, and of medium build. His hair was cropped close. Suddenly Nancy realized that he must be the boatman with a crew cut whom Helen had seen and also the fisherman on the river she herself had questioned. She recognized his nasal voice.

"Nancy Drew won't get a chance to reveal our scheme!"

But Jean! Nancy was astounded. What was this trio up to? Obviously something underhanded. Was Gay, alias Mary Mason, in league with them? And how did the miniature submarine fit into their scheme?

Frank maintained a tight grip on Nancy's arm. "Guess you won't go skin diving for a while." He gave a harsh laugh.

"You bet," Jean spoke up, her eyes gleaming coldly. Nancy noticed the girl no longer wore

glasses. “We’ll see to that. Nancy Drew won’t ever get a chance to reveal our scheme!”

Gil nodded. “We’ve got to clear out pronto and take her with us. The shipment’s aboard the boat. Everything’s cleaned out of here.”

The three accomplices held a whispered consultation. Before Nancy had time for further analysis, Gil looked at his watch.

“We’ve got to step on it. Simon will be worried.”

“See you there,” Jean said to Nancy slyly. “Try to figure this one out, Miss Private Eye!”

At these words, Frank gave Nancy a shove and dragged her to the river. The man in skin-diving gear was waiting. Nancy struggled to get away, but to no avail.

To her horror, the skin diver forced her into the back seat of the miniature submarine and tied her securely. She had a glimpse of Frank, Gil, and Jean boarding a motorboat hidden in a nearby cove. Then the skin diver shut the transparent hatch and the sub began to descend.

“How am I ever going to escape?” A wave of terror swept over the young sleuth. As the submarine plunged downward, Nancy told herself sternly, “I must keep cool!”

She noticed that the skin diver remained in front with another man, who was piloting the craft. “They’re two more members of the gang,” Nancy thought. “I wonder who Simon is? And what kind of shipment is on the boat Gil mentioned? Are we heading there now?”

The navigator was steering forward, using a simple control stick and automatic pedals. He and the frogman kept their backs turned to Nancy. Were these men enemy agents, or smugglers? Perhaps Emily’s diamonds were part of the mysterious shipment!

Nancy thought about the rocky overhang under which the shark-nosed sub had been hidden. “I suppose Frank was the lookout,” she conjectured. “And Gil probably went to meet him in a canoe from the inn.”

She concluded that the skin diver had probably thrown the spear at her. “Either to get rid of me for good, or scare me away. And it was probably this sub that caused Helen and me to capsize in the canoe.”

It occurred to Nancy that even if she learned the answers to all her questions, it might do her no good. Escape seemed impossible. She realized that none of her friends, her father, or the police would have the slightest idea where she was.

Then a faint hope came to her. Carl Bard had seen her leave the inn! “If only they think to search the river,” Nancy thought worriedly.

Trying to forget her fears, the young sleuth concentrated on the two scheming waitresses: Mary, doubtless a disguise of Gay Moreau, and Jean Holmes who—

“It’s fantastic—but—if Gay can impersonate me, and pose as Mary, why couldn’t she be Jean Holmes?”

Nancy was sure the actress could easily play any role—plus being Gay herself! Gay, beautiful but avaricious; easygoing, flighty Mary, and shy, plain Jean.

Gay, familiar with the inn, had disguised herself as Mary. She could have been the “ghost,” sometimes as a titian blonde, at others wearing a dark wig. As part of the scare operation, she had left, using the excuse of the place being haunted. Then she had come back in another disguise—as Jean Holmes.

Gay, as Mary, could easily have overheard Mrs. Willoughby describing Emily’s twenty diamonds, and also telling Maud the planned date of presentation. Then Mary bought the substitutes. She had slipped into the hidden closet without being seen and committed the theft.

The speculation brought Nancy back to the present. Had Frank and the men on the sub helped with the diamond robbery? Was the cellar in the river shack being used to hide stolen goods to be taken away later in the sub? Would the answer to these questions explain the other mysterious events, including the time bomb and the vibrations at the inn, all done to scare people away from the place?

It seemed to the young sleuth that ages had gone by since her capture. But now the sub

slowly ascended to the surface. Nancy heard the navigator say that something was wrong with the mechanism. As he steered toward a small cabin cruiser a few hundred feet away, Nancy saw that they were on an isolated section of the Muskoka River.

The sub stopped alongside the cruiser and the pilot opened the hatch. He untied Nancy from the seat and helped her mount a small ladder to the deck of the cruiser.

Awaiting them were Jean Holmes, Gil Gary, and Frank! Jean laughed triumphantly. “Well, have a nice trip?” she taunted Nancy.

Unable to speak, and guarded closely by Gil and Frank, holding flashlights, Nancy gave her a disgusted look. She scanned the river for other nearby craft. There were none. If only a River Police Patrol boat would come by! But none did,

Meanwhile, the skin diver and pilot had hitched the miniature submarine to the stern of the cruiser. As the diver took off his face mask, Nancy saw that he was dark, wiry, and had an impassive expression. Jean gestured toward the pilot, a stocky man of about thirty.

“This is my brother-in-law Bud,” she smirked, as Gil tied Nancy’s arms behind her back, then bound her legs together with a stout rope. “I couldn’t introduce you when you visited my sister in Dockville. She did a good job of being Mary Mason, eh, Nancy?”

Nancy’s theory about two Mary Masons was correct! Also, it was now apparent that Gay Moreau had assumed her brother-in-law’s last name for her first Lilac Inn disguise.

The next moment Nancy was thrust violently forward through the door of a small cabin. She fell to the floor, and the door was slammed behind her. Simultaneously, the cruiser’s engine churned and the boat began moving. Despair engulfed Nancy.

Meanwhile, back in River Heights, Chief McGinnis had just received a phone call from the Dockville chief. He reported that the house Nancy had visited was empty. Neighbors had said that the three occupants, a husband and wife and a woman relative had rented the house. They had been quiet, and kept to themselves.

One woman neighbor had mentioned, however, that occasionally she heard hammering and drilling noises coming from the basement of the house. The police sergeant had checked and discovered some electronic equipment in the cellar, along with several books on navigation and skin diving.

“But we found a real prize in the garage,” the sergeant added. “The stolen truck that almost ran into Miss Drew! We’re keeping a stake-out on the house.”

Chief McGinnis had just hung up when a call came in from Carson Drew. “Chief,” the lawyer said tersely, “have you heard from Nancy?”

“Not since this afternoon. Why?”

The lawyer explained that he had just returned home, and telephoned the inn. He had learned from Miss Willoughby that Nancy had been missing for several hours. “Everyone, including the State Police, are out looking for her. Nancy’s convertible is still in the parking lot. Her canoe and diving equipment are still there.

“I don’t like this at all,” Carson Drew went on gravely. “I understand my daughter called you after talking with some actress who gave her a clue to the person who’s been posing as Nancy.”

“Yes, Nancy thinks her impersonator is an actress with a prison record. Her name is Gay Moreau.”

“Gay Moreau!” Carson Drew exclaimed. “Chief, if that girl’s responsible for Nancy’s disappearance, my daughter is in great danger!”

CHAPTER XIX

No Escape!

EVEN as Carson Drew made the pronouncement that Nancy's life was in danger, his daughter was thinking the same thing. She was lying on the cabin floor where she had been thrown, and was trying to loosen the ropes which bound her.

Nancy glanced around the tiny cabin. It had two bunks, a table, and a chair. "Even if I could work myself free, there's no escape route," she thought.

The imprisoned girl looked toward the one tiny porthole. At this moment the cruiser began to roll heavily. The river must be getting rough.

Just then the cabin door was opened and Nancy felt a strong gust of wind. Jean Holmes entered the room and slammed the door shut. She gave Nancy a gloating look.

"Comfortable? Oh, I forgot. Our clever sleuth can't talk." The ex-waitress walked over and tore the cloth from Nancy's mouth. The girl's lips felt parched and dry.

Jean laughed mockingly. "I suppose you'd like a drink of water. Well, Carson Drew's daughter can stay thirsty. Thanks to him," she said bitterly, "I gave up most of the luxuries of life for quite a while!"

"Dad!" Nancy cried out. "What did he have to do with—" She broke off, suddenly recalling the waitress's startled reaction when Nancy's father had peered into the inn dining room. Nancy also remembered the Merriweathers' story.

"I think I understand," Nancy said. "It was my father who proved you were guilty of check forgery, Gay Moreau!"

The other girl seemed thunderstruck. But she quickly recovered her poise. "So you found out who I am. Well, it won't do you any good."

Gay's tone was sinister. Nancy remained outwardly calm; at least, she could stall for time.

"You're the girl who impersonated me in Burk's Department Store," the young detective accused. "Also, you played the parts of Jean Holmes and Mary Mason at Lilac Inn."

"You can call me Gay now," the girl sneered. "I had you fooled, though, didn't I? But then, I was a good actress before I went to jail. Your father represented one of the persons whose checks I forged. I told him the day I was convicted I'd get revenge."

Nancy nodded. "And you got your chance to do it by posing as Carson Drew's daughter," she said. "First you broke into our home and stole my charge plate, and the silver-framed picture to copy my appearance. You took a flowered dress of mine, too."

"That's right." Gay tossed her head defiantly. "The mink stole, evening gowns, and watch will fit into my new social life."

"And I suppose Emily's diamonds will, too?" Nancy prodded.

Gay smiled triumphantly. "Yes, I have the real jewels, and Emily Willoughby has the fake ones. A tidy haul. They're here in this cabin. We'll sell them for a fancy price where we've disposed of a few other things."

Gay began boasting of how the jewel theft had been accomplished. She said that after leaving jail she had not been able to find theatrical parts. Finally, she had forged references, and worked as Mary Mason for Mrs. Stonewell.

"After that," Gay went on, "my brother-in-law Bud, Gil Gary, Frank, and their pals came up with a sharp idea of buying the sub to use on the Angus River so no one could spot the place

we were using as a hide-out. And that was why Gil and I went to work at Lilac Inn. Never mind that part now. Anyhow, while I was there I overheard Mrs. Willoughby tell that woman Maud when she was going to present the diamonds. I decided to steal them at the party. Gil turned off the lights at the right moment."

When Gil had phoned her that Nancy was at Lilac Inn, Gay said she had schemed her next move.

"To throw people off the track, I disguised myself as Jean Holmes and went to the Empire Employment Agency to ask for waitress work at Lilac Inn. What a break when I met Maud Potter there and got the job without registering at the agency."

"So that's why you came to the inn earlier for an interview," Nancy interjected. "Later you sneaked back, and hid in the secret closet."

"Yes. What made you guess *I* was the thief?"

Nancy explained about the lilac petals and other clues, including the note she had found which led her to Lillie Merriweather.

"Lillie!" Gay said scornfully. "Did she tell you that she was one of the people whose checks I forged?"

"No!" Nancy replied in amazement.

Gay sneered. "Lillie changed her mind and didn't prosecute—always felt sorry for me and her dad did too. I liked him. In fact, I stole Mr. Daly's blue pipe and mailed it to Mr. Merriweather. But Lillie's had all the stage breaks! I hated her, but never let on!"

Nancy stared at Gay unbelievingly. The former actress certainly had a twisted outlook on life!

Now Gay said she had put the note to Lillie in an old apple tree for Frank to pick up and deliver. "But he didn't come—that John McBride was always snooping around. He even found our shack, but not what was in it. I finally managed to sneak the note away when the policeman turned his back."

"You decided," said Nancy, "to throw suspicion away from yourself by implicating Maud Potter."

"Sure," Gay admitted. "Maud Potter was a natural for your suspicions. So I figured you might believe she was the one who put the diamond in your purse. *I* did that, and got a friend of mine to bump into you at a good moment.

"Also, I was the mysterious girl Helen saw in the grove. Gil was the one who knocked Miss Corning out. He got panicky when he saw her, and thought she might not be fooled by the 'haunt' idea."

"And of course," Nancy said dryly, "you and I met face to face in the grove."

"*You* were the ghostly figure who jumped out at me?" Gay said, surprised. Then she laughed. "Pretty good impersonator yourself." She explained that on the night Nancy had encountered her, she had been in a hurry and forgotten to wear the dark wig.

Nancy's bonds were biting into her skin painfully. But she gave no sign of this as she asked Gay, "Did you print on a paper a message about pruning 'blue pipes'?"

"Yes. Bud told me to put it there for Gil. It meant the sub would arrive that night." Gay said that "blue pipes" had been used as a signal in other ways. The flowers she, as Jean, had placed in the dining-room window meant "Watch out for sleuths." Gay admitted also that the gang had tapped the inn's telephone wires after "Mary Mason" had left.

At that moment the cabin door opened. A man Nancy had not yet seen stood there. He was tall and dark, with thin features.

Gay introduced him as Simon, her fiancé. "You talk too much, Gay," he growled.

Ignoring Nancy, he added, "It's very foggy and the water's getting rougher. Frank and Gil are watching for patrol boats. Bud's steering."

Simon left. Gay then opened a large make-up kit. She took out two wigs. "Watch this," she

told Nancy proudly.

The actress pulled off the brown wig she was wearing and put on a reddish-blond hairpiece. Then she applied long eyelashes and heavy rouge and lipstick.

"Meet Mary!" she said.

Nancy did not comment. Instead, she asked, "Did one of your pals throw a rock at my car?"

"Yes, as a warning, but you ignored it," Gay replied. "I knew through Gil you were suspicious. We were ready in case you hit Dockville."

Gay removed her Mary Mason make-up. "And now, meet your double, Nancy Drew!" she said dramatically.

The captive sleuth watched as Gay deftly arranged her hair like Nancy's. Then, with eyebrow pencil and other cosmetics, transformed her face. Nancy had to admit the resemblance was striking.

"Incidentally," said Gay, "thanks for the loan of your pink dress. Wish I could have kept the date with that handsome John McBride."

"Tell me, who was responsible for the message phoned to Anna?" Nancy asked.

"Bud. He's a good mimic," Gay bragged. "And our skin diver threw the spear at you when Frank signaled."

"Whose idea was it to place the time Bomb?"

"Mine," Gay replied. "But Gil put it in the cottage."

Gay now admitted that Bud's midget submarine was the object which had capsized the girls' canoe. He and Simon had been in the craft and were practicing a partial ascent as the girls passed over it.

"That was really just an accident," Gay added.

Nancy's mind dwelled on the submarine. Was it also part of Bud's "sharp idea"? She could get no answer from Gay about this.

The actress did admit that the gang was responsible for breaking in and turning on the phonograph record, stealing the lilac tree, and digging the hole into which Hank had fallen. They had also caused the inn to quake by using a strong vibrating machine against the cellar wall, then running off with it before being detected.

All these things had been done, Gay said, to make Emily and Dick close the inn and keep Nancy and the others from detecting the gang's project until they were finished in this locale and could make a getaway to another spot. "We knew you were finding out too much," Gay told Nancy. "So we had to act fast. The trouble was, nothing made you get out!"

On a sudden hunch, Nancy queried, "Does this other project of yours have to do with the missing tools?"

Gay hesitated. "That's something you'll have to figure out."

Just then, the boat dipped sharply. Gay clutched her stomach. "Oh, I feel terrible!" she cried, her face a grayish green. "I think I'm sea-sick!"

The impersonator slumped into a bunk. Nancy's eyes darted around the cabin, trying to guess where the diamonds might be. Certainly not in any of the obvious places. Her glance lingered on a wall barometer. This would be an ideal spot if its back were hollow!

Then the cabin door opened and Gil entered. "What's the matter with you, Gay?" he said roughly. "C'mon. We're headin' for shore till this blows over and the fog lifts."

"Oh, leave me alone!" Gay said irritably. "I'm ill."

The next moment there was a crash and the sound of splintering wood. Nancy was hurled headlong across the cabin, and Gil and Gay were flung to the floor. They heard cries from outside and someone shouting, "About, Bud! *About!"*

Gil was the first to recover from the crash. He dashed out of the cabin. In a minute he was back with Simon.

“We struck a log!” Simon gasped. “We’re sinking! And there’s a fire in the engine!”

“Besides, some boat’s approaching!” Gil added. “Might be a patrol. Frank and the others have jumped over. We’re scramming too, in the sub.”

“Get up, Gay!” Simon ordered.

But the former actress, chalk-white, seemed unable to move. Simon rushed over and yanked the actress to her feet.

“The diamonds!” Gay screeched. “We can’t forget them!”

“We can’t be caught with loot,” Simon argued. “We’ll skin-dive for the diamonds later.” He glanced toward Nancy. “I’d better cut her loose.”

The man groped in his pocket for a knife, but Gay stopped him. “Don’t be a fool!” she hissed. “If she drowns, we can’t be blamed. Good-by, Nancy Drew!”

The trio raced from the cabin. Nancy, bound and helpless, was left alone in the sinking ship.

CHAPTER XX

Nancy's Citation

UNTIL now, Nancy had not fully believed that her captors would let her perish. But she was left, bound hand and foot, aboard a sinking vessel!

Suddenly Nancy sniffed the acrid smell of smoke —the fire was spreading! She screamed for help until her throat was hoarse. Then, about to faint, Nancy heard an answering shout, and the sound of a boat pulling up outside the porthole.

"Oh, thank goodness," she breathed fervently.

Shortly, two men in River Police Patrol uniforms hurried into the cabin. They quickly untied Nancy and carried her on deck. She saw that the fog had thinned and that the cruiser's stem was aflame. Desperately she tried to tell the men of the escaped gang, and what had happened.

"No time to talk now!" one of them urged.

The patrol boat stood near the bow of the cruiser, which was almost submerged. Nancy and the men quickly transferred to the other boat.

As the patrol craft pulled away, giant searchlights played over the surrounding waters. Captain Morgan, head of the patrol, came up beside Nancy in time to see the burning cruiser go under. Emily Willoughby's precious diamonds would soon be on the river bottom.

Nancy identified herself, and quickly explained about being taken prisoner and left in the sinking ship to drown. "You must capture the five men and Gay Moreau! Some of them are probably swimming to shore. The others went in the sub."

To her astonishment, the captain asked Nancy to look through a nearby porthole into a cabin where three men sat. "Recognize them?" he asked.

"Yes!" Nancy gasped. "Bud Mason, Frank, and the skin diver!"

Captain Morgan nodded. "We fished them out of the water just before rescuing you. They said they had jumped overboard after colliding with a fallen log—but nothing about any prisoner on the cruiser."

"Naturally!" said Nancy. "Hurry! You might still spot the sub if it hasn't submerged."

Captain Morgan looked dubious. Nevertheless, he barked an order. A high-beam searchlight was played over the water.

A moment later Nancy cried out, "Look!"

A shark-shaped object could be seen floating above water in the distance. Captain Morgan picked up binoculars.

"You're right, Miss Drew. It is a small sub!" he exclaimed. "Full speed ahead!"

Nancy waited tensely as the patrol craft pulled alongside the submarine. Gay, Gil, and Simon were inside it, with the hatch open.

Captain Morgan and his men gave the actress a startled look, then glanced at Nancy. The girl's heart sank. No wonder the men were confused! Gay still wore her Nancy Drew disguise!

"Gay Moreau has been impersonating me," explained Nancy, as the trio were helped aboard and towlines attached to the submarine. "She and the others are diamond thieves."

"This girl has been impersonating *me* for some time!" Gay snapped. "*My* name is Nancy Drew!"

The young sleuth started to protest, when Gay withdrew a wallet from the pocket of her dress. Nancy was dumfounded when Gay took out a driver's license and handed it to the captain.

"This license was issued to Miss Nancy Drew of River Heights," the captain said, frowning.

Nancy realized that Gil must have stolen the license when he planted the bomb in the cottage! Gay smiled triumphantly. *"This* girl is the thief! She was tied up because she sneaked aboard our boat and tried to steal jewelry from my luggage."

Nancy realized that the actress in desperation had cleverly reversed the situation to keep from being arrested. No one aboard could, or would, identify the real Nancy Drew. If the gang's stories were believed the six might be released. Nancy could be taken into custody.

"By the time my identification can be established, the others will have recovered the diamonds and escaped," she thought desperately.

Just then, a foghorn sounded and the group on board saw a searchlight sweeping across the water. Moments later, a second patrol launch came into view and pulled alongside.

Gay Moreau had pushed forward to stand in front of the young sleuth. At the same time, Nancy and she recognized Carson Drew standing at the railing beside John McBride and Lieutenant Brice. Also present was Chief McGinnis.

"Nancy!" Mr. Drew called. "Oh, Nancy, my dear, you're safe!"

Gay smiled and waved back. Then she edged furtively toward the stern, as if intending to jump overboard.

Nancy, meanwhile, had been expecting such a move. Unnoticed by Gay she had backed up several feet. The next moment, as the actress hurled herself toward the rail, Nancy tripped her. Gay went sprawling on the deck.

"That's one score evened," Nancy said firmly.

But Gay was still undaunted as Carson Drew walked across a plank and was about to step onto the deck of the other craft. She leaped to her feet. Shoving Nancy aside, she dashed toward Mr. Drew.

"Dad—I'm so glad to see you!" she cried, and was about to fling herself into his arms when Nancy intervened.

"No, Dad, it's a disguise!" she exclaimed, and grasped Gay by the arm. With her free hand, she rubbed off some of the actress's heavy make-up.

As Gay stood glaring balefully, her true looks were disclosed. Carson Drew said severely, "Well, Gay Moreau, justice is catching up with you again." Then he kissed his daughter.

All this time Simon had been pinned against the railing by several of the police. Now he made a desperate effort to jump overboard, but was instantly stopped. "Well, I guess we've had it, Gay," he said grimly.

Gay's features were contorted with rage. "Next time we'll set a better bomb for you, Nancy Drew!" she screamed.

"There'll be no next time!" Chief McGinnis spoke sternly, as the river police officers put handcuffs on Gay, Gil, and Simon.

Brief explanations were made to Captain Morgan, who led the chief and Lieutenant Brice to the cabin where the other three captives were being guarded. The officials spent some time interrogating them while Nancy talked to her father and John McBride, bringing them up to date on the recent happenings.

"Gay almost had me fooled, until we came on board," Carson Drew admitted.

Later, in the captain's quarters, the officials met with Carson Drew, Nancy, and John.

"Nancy, you deserve an explanation from me," said John. "I told you once that my Army work was confidential. Actually I've been working on a case while visiting at Lilac Inn."

John stated that he was in reality a major at an Army missile base. "Some top-secret electronics parts had been stolen from the base, and suspicion fell on Frank Logan, a sergeant

in the Engineers' Corps, who had been dishonorably discharged not long before the theft. Nothing was ever proved, but my mission was to follow up on the man and determine his guilt or innocence beyond a doubt."

The major had obtained a clue that Frank was in the River Heights area and finally traced him to the vicinity of Benton. John decided that staying at Lilac Inn, owned by his friend Dick, would be a good cover-up.

"One day, near the river, I came upon a piece of an engineer's insigne from the same branch Frank was in. This gave me an idea that he was in the vicinity. When you and Helen mentioned the man with the crew cut," John explained, "and his not trying to rescue you, I thought he might be Frank. Yet I had no luck pinpointing his whereabouts. That is, until I heard certain tools useful to an engineer and Dick's jig saw were missing. And when you found the metal device in the lilac grove, Nancy, I recognized it as a stolen electronics part. That reaffirmed my suspicions that Frank was nearby."

Major McBride continued, "I also learned that electronics parts were being stolen from shops and factories in this region, and the thieves were using a different stolen car or truck each time for their getaway, then abandoning it."

He told Nancy that the red panel truck was one of the vehicles used and Chief McGinnis explained to Nancy about finding it in Dockville, along with books on navigation and skin diving.

Nancy learned that Gay had discovered the river shack's old cellar when visiting the inn as a child. While working for Mrs. Stonewell, Gay had told Bud and his pals about the place and they hatched the scheme for storing the stolen parts there.

Some of the electronics equipment, John disclosed, was being sold on the black market at a town a hundred miles down the Muskoka River. By stealing the diamonds, Gay and the crooks would have enough money to live lavishly for a while until ready to start their nefarious scheme again.

"Were they the ones who used my convertible and left it in the lane?" Nancy asked.

John replied Yes, but only to cause one more annoyance. The major now explained that he had received permission from his superiors to talk with the police. "A black-market operator who was arrested tipped us off that the crooks from whom he was buying parts might be in Benton last night to arrange for a final getaway."

John said he had returned to Lilac Inn that evening in time to meet Mr. Drew, Chief McGinnis, who had come along during his free hours because of his interest in Nancy, and Lieutenant Brice. The trooper had just received word over the police radio of the accident to the cruiser. This, together with the fact that Carl Bard had seen Nancy go toward the river, had given John the idea that the men should board a patrol boat and search the sinking cruiser.

"This certainly has been an involved and dangerous mystery," said Carson Drew.

"Yes, and Nancy deserves most of the credit for solving it," the State Police lieutenant spoke up.

Nancy chuckled. "Don't forget, we still have to find Emily's diamonds. John, how about a skin-diving search by daylight tomorrow?"

"With pleasure." John grinned.

Everyone at Lilac Inn was relieved and thankful to learn that Nancy was safe and that the mysteries had been cleared up. The following morning the Willoughbys, Dick, and Helen came along to witness the treasure-diving expedition.

A river patrol launch stood by as Nancy and John skin-dived to the bottom of the Muskoka River. After locating the sunken cruiser, the couple boarded it and entered the cabin where Nancy had been imprisoned. The sleuth went immediately to the wall and took down the barometer. To her disappointment, the diamonds were not secreted there.

John and Nancy looked in every conceivable hiding place, but found no clue. Nancy racked her brains, trying to imagine what spot Gay would have chosen. A sudden hunch came to her

as she spotted the actress's make-up case.

Nancy opened it, and searched among the contents. She picked out two tubes of lipstick. Nancy removed the tops and gasped.

The tubes were choked with glittering diamonds!

John gave Nancy a congratulatory pat on her shoulder. The girl detective put the lipsticks into a pouch attached to her waist and the divers surfaced.

Emily was thrilled upon recovering her jewels and tears came to her eyes. Dick and Mrs. Willoughby could not praise Nancy enough.

John beamed at his skin-diving companion. "One of your best deductions, Nancy."

A little later that day John announced that a salvage crew had raised the cruiser. A stock of valuable electronics parts was found in the small hold, including those Frank Logan had stolen from the missile base. The gang had planned to sell many of them to an enemy agent.

A week later Nancy was honored at a colorful Army ceremony where she was presented with the Distinguished Civilian Service Medal for outstanding work.

"This is marvelous. Thank you!" she said.

When the young detective returned to Lilac Inn for a party on the eve of Emily's wedding, the bride-to-be gave her two attendants pins set with tiny diamonds. Nancy's was in the form of a lilac spray.

"I had this made especially so you'll never forget the mystery at Lilac Inn, Nancy." Emily smiled. "Dick and I will be forever grateful to you."

"So exquisite!" Nancy cried, and thanked her friend. "This was such a challenging mystery."

Secretly she wondered when another sleuthing adventure would come her way. "Soon, I hope," Nancy thought. She was to have her wish when she found herself involved in *The Secret of Shadow Ranch.*

Later, as Nancy, Helen, and Emily were talking, the two older girls suddenly stopped speaking on the subject of their forthcoming weddings. Helen said, "Goodness, Nancy, you must be tired of hearing us talk about steady partners when—"

Nancy interrupted. Laughing gaily, she said, "Not at all. For the present, *my* steady partner is going to be mystery!"

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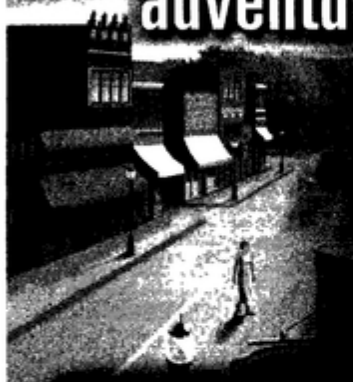

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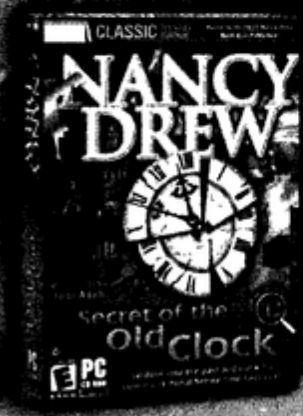

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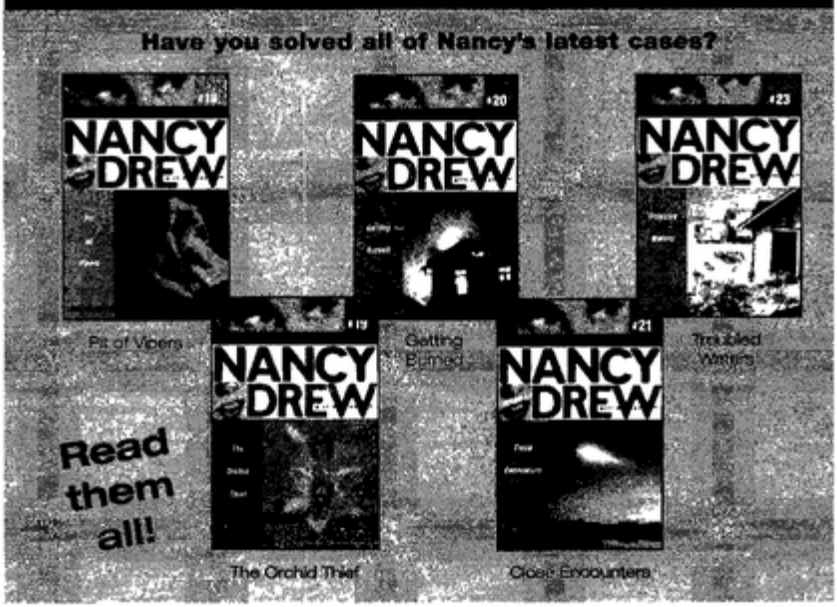

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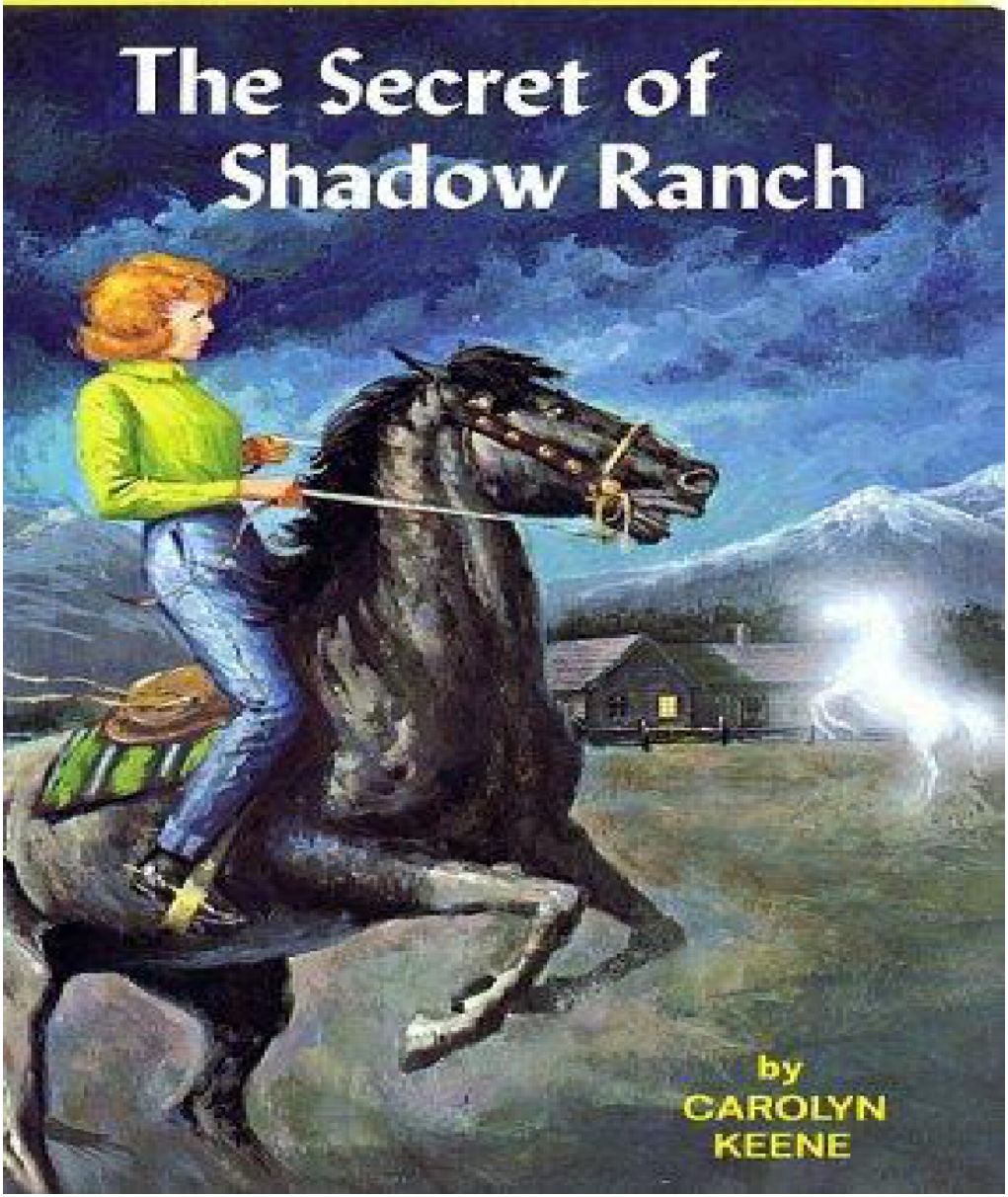
NANCY DREW MYSTERY STORIES 5

The Secret of Shadow Ranch



by CAROLYN KEENE

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THE SECRET OF SHADOW RANCH

NANCY DREW arrives in Phoenix, Arizona, eagerly looking forward to a fun-filled vacation at Shadow Ranch, but abruptly finds herself involved in a baffling mystery. The ranch is being haunted by a phantom horse and maliciously damaged by an unknown enemy. Local people believe that the ghostly animal is carrying out the curse of Dirk Valentine, the romantic outlaw who was killed many years ago at Shadow Ranch, where he had gone to fulfill a promise to his sweetheart.

Suspecting that a treasure hidden by Valentine may be at the root of the Shadow Ranch mystery, Nancy undertakes a challenging search, aided by her friends Bess Marvin and George Fayne. The first vital clue is found in an antique watch and sparks a series of clever deductions and dangerous developments. While seeking further clues, the girls' investigation in a ghost town ends in near disaster when Nancy is trapped inside a building that is toppled by a rockslide—a rockslide which is deliberately caused. But the pretty titian-haired detective remains undaunted in her determination to solve the mystery.

For those who enjoy a suspenseful thriller, Nancy Drew's first Western adventure makes truly fascinating reading.

“Nancy, be careful!” Bess cried fearfully

NANCY DREW MYSTERY STORIES®

The Secret of Shadow Ranch

BY CAROLYN KEENE

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CHAPTER 1

A Curious Stranger

"HERE I am, girls!" exclaimed Nancy Drew as she hugged her two best friends. "All set for an exciting vacation at Shadow Ranch."

"I hope you had a good flight," said Bess Marvin. The pretty, slightly plump blonde was not smiling as usual. Nancy wondered why.

"Are we glad to see you!" remarked George Fayne, an attractive tomboyish girl with short dark hair. She glanced anxiously around the crowded waiting room in the Phoenix air terminal. "Let's go where we can talk."

Nancy looked at the cousins with keen blue eyes. "What's the matter? Is something wrong?"

Bess bit her lip, then burst out, "Oh, Nancy, we can't stay! We all have to go home tomorrow!"

"But why?" asked Nancy, astonished.

"Because there's a mystery at the ranch," George said bluntly, "and Uncle Ed thinks it's not safe for us to be here."

Bess put in, "But, Nancy, if you could convince Uncle Ed you can solve the case, maybe he'd let us stay. However, I'm not so sure I want to. It's—it's really pretty frightening."

"I can't wait to hear what the mystery is," Nancy said excitedly.

George insisted on collecting Nancy's suitcases at the baggage-claim section. "But save the mystery until I come back!" George said and hastened off. Bess led Nancy toward an attractive sandwich shop in the air terminal.

On the way, admiring glances were cast at the two girls. Titian-haired Nancy was a trim figure in her olive-green knit with matching shoes. Beige accessories and knitting bag completed her costume. Bess wore a pale-blue cotton which showed off her deep suntan to advantage.

While they walked, Bess explained that her uncle had decided at breakfast to send the girls home. At his insistence, George had made reservations for a flight the next day.

"We told him what a wonderful detective you are and begged him to let you try to solve the mystery. He said it was too dangerous for a girl. George phoned you, but you'd already left." Bess sighed. "It's a shame! We could have had a super vacation!"

The three girls had grown up together in River Heights, and had shared many exciting adventures.

Several weeks before, Bess and George's aunt and uncle, Edward and Elizabeth Rawley, owners of Shadow Ranch, had invited them to spend the summer in Arizona. The Rawleys had easily been persuaded to include Nancy in the invitation.

Nancy's father, Carson Drew, a famous lawyer, had given his consent to the trip, but had asked his daughter to delay her departure for a week in order to do some work for him.

Previously Nancy had helped him solve *The Secret of the Old Clock*. It was her first case and had led to many other dangerous assignments, the most recent of which was *The Mystery at Lilac Inn*.

Now the young sleuth was eager to hear about the mystery at Shadow Ranch. She and Bess strolled into the sandwich shop and made their way among the crowded tables to a small one in a corner.

As they seated themselves, a slender gray-haired man in a tan suit sat down at the next table. Nancy placed her knitting bag on the floor between his chair and her own.

"What are you making?" Bess asked, nodding toward the bag.

"A sweater for Dad," Nancy replied. "I hope to finish it for his birthday. Originally I bought the wool for myself, but he admired the color, so I decided to surprise him and knit a sweater for him. Do you think he'll like the style?"

"He'll love it. Not to change the subject, but there are some handsome cowboys at the ranch," Bess remarked. As she told Nancy of the fun she and George had been having, Bess grew more cheerful.

Just then George joined them. Besides the brown linen purse that matched her dress, she now carried a big Thermos jug.

"I had a porter put your bags in the car," she told Nancy, "and I brought this Thermos back. We have to fill it with water for the drive across the desert. We started with two jugs. Bess and I drank up the water in one on the way here."

When the waitress came to take the girls' order, Nancy and George chose soft drinks, while Bess studied the menu.

"This mystery has me so upset," she declared, "that my appetite is gone." Then she added, "I'll have a double chocolate sundae with walnuts."

Nancy and George grinned. "Poor girl," said George, "she's wasting away."

Bess looked sheepish. "Never mind me," she said. "Start telling Nancy about the mystery."

George tugged her chair closer and bent forward. "About two months ago," she began, "Uncle Ed and Aunt Bet acquired Shadow Ranch in payment of a debt. They'd always wanted to be ranchers, so they moved there and began working the property. But for the past month there have been so many accidents that they've decided the ranch is being sabotaged."

"At first they weren't sure"—Bess took up the story—"but after last night, Uncle Ed said there was no doubt."

"What happened?" Nancy asked.

"The phantom horse, appeared," replied George.

Nancy's eyes sparkled with interest. "A phantom! Tell me!"

Bess shivered. "It's the weirdest thing—all glowing white and filmy! We saw it running across what we call the big meadow."

George added, "Shorty Steele—he's one of the ranch hands—says it's supposed to be the ghost of the horse which belonged to Dirk Valentine, an old-time outlaw."

"There's a very romantic legend about him," Bess said. "He was the sweetheart of Frances Humber, daughter of the local sheriff, who was the original owner of Shadow Ranch. One night when Dirk Valentine came there to see Frances, the sheriff shot and killed him. As he lay dying, the desperado put a curse on the Humber property, vowing that his horse would haunt Shadow Ranch. And whenever it appeared, destruction would follow."

"That curse came true," George said grimly. "This morning Uncle Ed found one of his wind-mills had been pulled down."

Nancy looked thoughtful. "Did the phantom horse make any sound?"

"No," replied George, "but just before it appeared we heard a weird whistle. The ranchers say the outlaw always called his horse that

way."

"The phantom horse must be a trick, of course," said Nancy. "It sounds as if someone is trying to scare your aunt and uncle off their property." As she spoke, Nancy became aware that the man at the next table was listening intently to the conversation.

"But why—" Bess broke off as she felt Nancy's foot nudge hers under the table. George caught Nancy's warning glance and also understood.

Just then the waitress brought their order and the girls chatted lightly of other subjects. When they finished and their check had come, Nancy reached for her knitting bag and gave a cry of alarm.

"What's the matter?" Bess asked.

"My bag! I can't find it."

George exclaimed, "I'll bet that man who sat next to us took it! He's gone too!"

The three girls jumped up and looked around, but the man was not in sight. George hurried outside to see if she could find him.

Nancy, meanwhile, looked on the floor nearby. Under the far side of the man's table lay the knitting bag. Quickly Nancy retrieved it.

"See if anything's missing!" Bess advised. "Mavbe your wallet's gone!"

Nancy made a search, but as far as she could tell, the original contents were intact. However, their arrangement seemed to be different. Had the man been snooping—and if so, why?

Bess paid the check and the girls walked to the door. They met George coming in. "Didn't see him anywhere," she said. "Guess he drove off. The thief! He—" George stopped short. "Nancy, you have your bag!"

Nancy grinned. "Thanks for your help, anyway."

"I still don't like Old Eavesdropper," George declared.

As the girls walked through the terminal, Nancy stopped at a row of telephone booths. "Wait a moment," she said. "I promised to call home and let Hannah know when I arrived here."

Bess volunteered to fill the Thermos jug while Nancy phoned. "Give my love to Hannah," she called back as she hurried off.

"Mine, too," said George as Nancy entered the phone booth.

Mrs. Hannah Gruen was the Drews' warm-hearted housekeeper who

had looked after Nancy since her mother's death when she was three. She and Nancy held a deep affection for each other.

Soon Hannah's cheerful voice came over the wire. "Don't worry about anything here, Nancy," she said. "Just enjoy yourself."

By the time Nancy hung up, Bess had returned. "I didn't tell Hannah I might be right home," Nancy reported.

"She's going to get a big surprise when we turn up tomorrow," George remarked gloomily.

Nancy smiled. "Not if I can persuade your uncle to change his mind."

As the girls stepped from the cool building the afternoon sun was dazzling. Waves of heat shimmered over the parked cars.

George led the way past several lines of cars, then turned into a row and walked toward an old ranch wagon. As the girls drew closer, they exclaimed in surprise. A man was dropping something through the open window of the car! *He was the eavesdropper who had sat beside them*!

"What are you doing?" George called.

The stranger glanced up, startled, then darted away among the cars.

Nancy dashed to the ranch wagon, with the girls close behind her. There was a piece of paper on the seat.

Nancy picked it up. "A note!"

In crudely penciled letters it said: *"Keep away from Shadow Ranch."*

"Come on!" Nancy exclaimed. "We must catch that man and find out what this means!"

“What are you doing?” George called to the stranger

CHAPTER II

Dangerous Surprises

THE girls sped off in the direction the man had fled. At the end of the row of cars, they paused to look right and left.

"There he is!" Nancy exclaimed. The man was hastening toward the terminal. He looked back, then broke into a run.

Nancy and George sprinted ahead and saw him dash into the building. The girls followed, dodging people and baggage carts, but the fugitive had disappeared among the crowd.

"Where is he?" Bess panted as she caught up to them.

"Gone," George said tersely. "No use looking for him in here."

But Nancy had not given up. Their dash into the terminal had excited curious stares from passers-by and a newsstand attendant.

"Did you ever see that man before?" she asked the clerk behind the news counter. "The one we were chasing?"

"No," he said. "What happened? Did he steal something? Should I call the police?"

"No, thank you," said Nancy. "But I'd like to find out who he is."

She questioned some other people nearby, but none of them had ever seen the man before.

Nancy returned to the cousins. "I'm afraid that's that." As they left the building, Nancy realized that she was still holding the note and tucked it into her knitting bag.

"One thing we learned," she said as they crossed the parking lot again, "whoever the man is, he's connected with the mystery at the ranch."

"But why should he want to keep us away from there?" Bess asked.

"Perhaps for the same reason someone wants to drive your aunt and uncle off the property," Nancy replied.

When they reached the ranch wagon, Nancy volunteered to drive. George agreed and acted as her guide through the streets of Phoenix.

As they left the outskirts, the road stretched before them like an endless white ribbon with brown desert on either side as far as the eye could see. Here and there were dark clumps of sage and salt grass. Beyond, on the horizon, lay the hazy blue shapes of mountains.

"That's where we're headed, pardner," George said with a grin. "One hundred and fifty miles of the hottest, thirstiest ride you ever took!"

For a while cars passed the girls from both directions, then grew fewer and fewer.

Bess, who had been unusually silent, spoke up. "What I can't figure out is why anybody would want to take Shadow Ranch from Uncle Ed. It's in very poor condition."

George agreed. "It almost seems as if Dirk Valentine's curse has worked." She told Nancy that shortly after the outlaw's death, Sheriff Humber's fortunes had begun to fail. He had been forced to sell the ranch, section by section. One large part was now state property, on which old Indian cliff dwellings still stood. Finally Humber had lost the property altogether.

The next owner had tried to build it up, but suffered bad luck, too. Others had followed and with each the ranch had fallen into a worst state of disrepair. Ed Rawley had been obliged to sink a lot of money in the place, trying to get it into running condition.

Nancy had listened thoughtfully. "The property must have some hidden value," she said, "if somebody wants it so badly now."

For a while the girls rode without speaking. The wind had risen and the rush of it past the open windows, combined with the roar of the motor, made conversation difficult.

Suddenly Bess gave a sharp exclamation. "Nancy! We completely forgot to tell you about Alice!"

George slapped her forehead. "Good nightl What brains we are!"

"Alice who?" asked Nancy.

"Our cousin, Alice Regor. She's fourteen," replied Bess. "She's staying at Shadow Ranch, too."

"That is, she hopes she's staying," George amended. "If we go home, she'll have to leave, too."

"I feel sorry for her," Bess said. "She has a special reason for being

here—and she's hoping you can help her, Nancy."

"Me?" Nancy exclaimed. "How?"

"We've told her about you," Bess confessed, "and what a good detective you are."

Nancy laughed. "Now, Bess, you know you don't have to butter me up. Just tell me—what is Alice's mystery?"

Bess smiled. "I knew you'd try to help."

George explained, "Alice's father is missing. He's been gone almost six months."

She said that Ross Regor had been president of a bank in a suburb of Chicago, where he had lived with his family. Someone reported having seen him enter the bank on the night it was robbed. Mr. Regor had not been seen since.

"Some of the newspapers implied that he was in league with the gang," Bess said, "but naturally none of his family or friends believes that."

"From the way the burglar alarm was tampered with," George said, "the police were able to identify the gang easily. A few days later one of them was spotted in Phoenix, but eluded capture.

"Because of that, Alice thinks the gang is hiding out in this area and holding her father captive. Or, if he was released, he's wandering around here, a victim of amnesia."

Nancy was instantly sympathetic. "That's not much to go on, but I'll do my best."

During the past five minutes the wind had been increasing and Nancy was using considerable strength to keep the wheel steady. Suddenly a brown swirling cloud of sand arose ahead of them.

"Sandstorm!" she cried. "Close the windows!"

Her words were lost as the wind shrieked and a stinging flash of sand hit their faces. While Nancy fought to hold the car on the road, Bess leaned over in back of her and managed to roll up the window. George closed the one on her side.

Nancy applied the brakes and the girls sat silent, astounded by the suddenness of the storm. The wind screamed and the sand sifted through the cracks around the windows and doors. The car rocked but stayed upright.

"Wow!" said George. "This desert is full of surprises!"

"Fearful ones," Bess added.

After an agonizing wait, the wind gradually died and the sand settled enough to permit the girls to see the red glow of the sun. Quickly they opened the doors and stepped outside.

"Ugh," said Bess, shaking her head. "I have sand in my hair!"

When they had brushed their clothes, Bess took one of the jugs from the back of the ranch wagon. Quickly she poured water into paper cups for all of them.

Nancy drank hers thirstily. "Umm, good old water," she said with a sigh.

"It was wonderful the way you held the car on the road," said Bess, helping herself to a second cup.

"Right," said George. "If we'd gone into the soft sand, we'd have been stranded!"

Nancy looked over the empty desert and shook her head. "How awful it must have been for the pioneers!" she said. "Imagine riding out here for days in a bumpy wagon or walking in the burning sun."

"With every drop of water precious," Bess said.

"They ran out of it, too, sometimes," George said soberly. "Uncle Ed told us that bones of pioneers and abandoned wagons have been found in many places."

"It's a ghastly thought," Bess remarked, and there was silence for a while.

Finally Nancy said, "If I read the mileage right, we have about an hour's drive yet." She poured some water from the Thermos onto her dean handkerchief and wiped her face and hands. George and Bess did the same, then the girls combed their hair and put on fresh lipstick.

Bess giggled. "I don't know why we bother. There's no one out here to see us but prairie dogs and lizards!"

"Cheer up," said Nancy. "You'll soon be back among all those handsome cowboys!"

George poured the remaining water from the Thermos jug into a cup and offered it to the others. Nancy and Bess declined, so George drank it herself.

The girls got into the car and Nancy turned the key in the ignition. The engine started at once.

"You don't know how glad I am to hear that," she confessed. "I was afraid sand might have clogged the motor."

As the car rolled along, Nancy said, "I've been thinking about the

mystery of Shadow Ranch. Tell me more of the windmill episode. If somebody tore it down, there'd have been a tremendous racket. Didn't the Rawleys hear it?"

"No," said George. "And the mill wasn't torn down. Uncle Ed figures from tire tracks and bumper dents that someone used the ranch truck, drove to the east meadow without lights, and backed hard into the windmill a few times. Over it went. That night there was a howling storm, so of course no one heard the noise."

Nancy frowned. "Aren't there any dogs on the ranch? Surely they'd have barked."

Bess bobbed her head. "The Rawleys have a fine watchdog. There wasn't a peep out of him. Besides, the east meadow is some distance from the ranch building."

"Then," said Nancy, "the whole thing must have been an inside job. The dog knows the person or persons who did this. Have you noticed anything suspicious about the ranch hands?"

Bess and George said all the men seemed very nice. "But then," George added, "I suppose they'd be careful to avoid suspicion. Well, Nancy, you can see you have a job ahead of you."

"If Uncle Ed will let us stay," Bess said. "Say, is it my imagination or isn't it getting hotter in this wagon?" She mopped her forehead with a handkerchief. "Better start on the second jug of water."

As Bess turned around to reach for it, Nancy glanced at the temperature gauge. "Oh no!" she exclaimed. "We're overheating!"

Grimly she slowed down and stopped. The girls climbed out.

Bess leaned into the car and released the lock of the hood. Nancy and George, using handkerchiefs on the hot metal, tried to lift it. At first the hood stuck, then suddenly flew up.

"Look out!" warned Nancy, unscrewing the radiator cap. She jumped back, pulling George with her as steam and boiling water spouted from the radiator.

"Are you all right?" Bess cried anxiously as she hurried toward them.

"I am. How about you, George?"

"I'm okay," said George, brushing the moisture from her face and short-cropped hair. "Just what I didn't need. A hot bath."

"Good thing we didn't drink that other jug of water," said Nancy. "We'll need it for the radiator."

“There must be a leak in it,” George said, looking worried. “The water’ll run right through.”

“It can’t be too bad,” Nancy reasoned. “After all, we came a long way before trouble started.”

“That’s right,” George conceded. “We should be able to make it to the ranch.” She went to the back of the ranch wagon and quickly returned with the Thermos jug.

She removed the top and handed the jug to Nancy, who tilted it over the radiator. *Not a drop came out!*

CHAPTER III

Warning Rattle

"WE'RE stranded!" Bess exclaimed in dismay.

George stared at the empty Thermos jug unbelievingly. "It can't be!" said George. "Shorty Steele promised to fill that jug with water."

"He must have forgotten," said Bess. She peered up and down the road, but there was no vehicle in sight.

Nancy tried to sound unworried as she spoke. "We might as well get in the car and wait for the water in the radiator to cool off—or maybe somebody will come along and help us." She replaced the radiator cap.

"If we're not at the ranch for supper, Uncle Ed or someone will drive out to look for us," Bess remarked hopefully.

Time dragged by as the girls waited. Nancy tested the water twice. It was still boiling hot. They might have to wait until evening and she was not keen about the idea of driving in a strange desert after dark.

"It's like an oven in this wagon," Bess complained.

"Hotter outside," George mumbled.

Suddenly the girls spotted a speck moving toward them on the dusty road. With relief the girls watched it take shape as a pickup truck.

"It's from the ranch!" George yelled, and dashed outside.

Bess followed, and when the truck stopped, she cried out, "Dave Gregory! You're a lifesaver! I was about to die of thirst and sunstroke!"

With a grin the tall, rangy cowboy swung down from the truck cab. Quickly Bess introduced him to Nancy.

Dave's handsome face grew stern when Bess and George explained what had happened. He pushed his hat to the back of his head, hooked his thumbs in his belt, and said, "Just what I figured. Three little dudes stuck high and dry. Mr. Rawley warned you to check your

water supply before you went out on the desert!"

"But Shorty promised he'd take care of it," said George.

Dave's eyes narrowed for an instant, then he said casually, "Well, this is dangerous country—you check your *own* gear, if you know what's good for you."

"We're sorry you had to come out after us," Nancy apologized.

"Mr. Rawley's orders," he said coolly, and strode to the truck.

In a minute Dave was back with a large can and a Thermos jug which he handed to the girls. While they drank gratefully, he poured water from the can into the radiator of the ranch wagon. He put back the cap and slammed the hood. The girls returned the jug and thanked him.

Dave gave a curt nod, walked to his truck, and swung aboard. By the time Nancy had the car started, the pickup had turned around and gone roaring down the road ahead of them.

"What's eating him?" George burst out. "He was about as friendly to you, Nancy, as a prairie dog!"

Nancy smiled. "Never mind. I can see his point." She wondered, however, what the trouble was. She had not even reached the ranch and already two people had been mysterious and unfriendly to her!

She followed the truck down the highway, and finally onto a road which wound through the barren hills at the foot of the mountains. It was nearly sunset when the girls entered a rocky pass and came out high above a valley. At the far side loomed a huge mountain with a group of low buildings nestled at its foot.

Bess pointed to them. "There's the ranch, and that's Shadow Mountain."

"I see how they got their names," said Nancy. "The great peak throws its shadow over the whole valley."

Half an hour later, they drove through a weather-beaten wooden gate into the ranch yard. Nancy pulled up to the ranch house, a long, one-story adobe building with a vine-covered portico across the front.

To the north of the house were the corral and stable. Beyond these stretched a large meadow, bordered by a wire fence. In the opposite direction lay the bunkhouse, and south of this, some distance away, a smaller, enclosed meadow. In it cattle were grazing.

A stocky sunburned man and a slender dark-haired woman hurried out to greet the girls as they alighted. "Bess, George!" exclaimed Eliza

beth Rawley. “We were so worried. And this must be Nancy! We’re very glad to see you, dear.” She gave her guest a hug and a smile, but the girl could see a strained look in her eyes.

Mr. Rawley took Nancy’s hand in his large one and said cordially, “I’m mighty glad to know you.”

“And I’m glad to be here,” Nancy replied. Her host gathered the suitcases and led the way toward the house.

Suddenly Nancy heard ferocious barking and turned to see a huge black dog bounding toward her. Behind him ran Dave Gregory.

“Chief!” he shouted. “Come back here!”

With a snarl the dog stopped short and began circling Nancy, snapping and barking. She did not move and the animal grew calmer. Then, as she spoke to him softly, he sniffed her hand. Moments later, Nancy was stroking his thick fur. He was a handsome black German shepherd, the largest Nancy had ever seen.

The others had been looking on in amazement. “Young lady,” said Ed Rawley, “I like the way you stood your ground. How about it, Dave?”

“Pretty good for a tenderfoot,” the cowboy admitted, then said, “Come along, Chief. Your job is chasing coyotes away from the chickens.” Obediently the dog trotted away toward the far end of the yard.

“The dog’s full name is Apache Chief,” said Elizabeth Rawley as she led the girls onto the portico.

Just then a slender girl with dark curly hair and big sad-looking eyes stepped from the house. Bess introduced her as their cousin Alice. She said hello to Nancy and shyly followed the others along the portico to Bess and George’s room, which Nancy was to share. Another door led into the main hallway of the house.

Mr. Rawley followed with the luggage. When the travelers had showered and put on fresh dresses, they heard a loud clanging from outside.

“That’s cook ringing for supper,” Alice explained to Nancy.

The girls hurried off to the kitchen at the far end of the house. Outside the screen door hung an iron triangle, still swinging. The big room was crowded with men who stood around a long oval table with a red-checkered tablecloth on it.

Nancy was introduced to a tall, thin man with sun-bleached hair. “This is Walt Sanders, my foreman,” said Mr. Rawley, “and some of

my men."

Sanders shook Nancy's hand. Shorty Steele, a husky middle-aged cowboy, did the same. Next a good-looking red-haired cowboy was introduced as Tex Britten and his dark-haired pal as Bud Moore. With a glance Bess informed Nancy that these two were the nice cowboys she had told her about.

"Grub's ready!" called a high, shrill voice. "Everybody sit down!" A small woman with frizzy gray hair and a white apron bustled from the stove to the table bearing a big platter of steaming meat.

"This is Mrs. Thurmond, our cook," said the ranch owner's wife.

In the confusion of taking seats, George had a chance to ask Shorty about the water he had promised to put in the station wagon. The cowboy's suntanned face showed surprise. "No, ma'am, I never said I'd do that," he declared. "You musta mistook my meanin'." He repeated the denial several times.

Nancy overheard Shorty and thought he was overdoing it. She wondered if "the misunderstanding" might not have been part of a plan to scare the girls away from the ranch.

After serving a hearty meal of roast beef, beans, corn fritters and salad, Mrs. Thurmond produced two large delicious apple pies. When the last bite had been eaten, Ed Rawley arose and there was silence.

"Okay, men," he said brusquely, "who has first watch?"

"Me and Dave," replied Shorty, and the two left the kitchen together.

Quietly the rest of the men arose and Mrs. Rawley led the girls through a door into a large living room. Like the kitchen, it ran from the front to the back of the house.

Among the comfortable furnishings were several slim, old-fashioned rockers and a round center table with a brass lamp on it. Bright-colored Indian rugs lay on the floor. At one end of the room was a huge stone fireplace.

"Tradition says that all the rocks in it have come from Shadow Ranch," Alice told Nancy. She pointed out a smooth round one. "That's an Indian grinding stone."

At the opposite end of the room beside a door leading to the portico was a deep window. In front of it on shelves stood rows of colored antique bottles.

"This is a lovely place!" Nancy exclaimed.

"We're sorry you can't stay to enjoy it," said Mrs. Rawley as her husband entered from the kitchen.

"Yes," he added, "but it's too dangerous. We're under attack. We can't figure out by whom or why. I only know that if the damage keeps on, we won't be able to stand the expense. We'll lose Shadow Ranch."

Mrs. Rawley explained that the sheriff could not spare a man to be a full-time guard at the ranch, so her husband and the hands took turns standing watch.

"Perhaps you have enemies who want revenge on you," Nancy suggested. "Or maybe your property has hidden value."

The owner replied that he could think of nothing to support either theory. Nancy then described the man at the airport and told what had happened.

"The note's in your knitting bag," Bess spoke up. "I'll get it!"

She hurried to the girls' room and returned with Nancy's knitting bag.

The young sleuth took out the note and crossed the room to give it to the rancher. Bess started to close the bag. Instead, she idly picked up the half-finished sweater. Underneath it lay a small object loosely wrapped in dirty brown paper.

"What's this, Nancy?" she asked. As she lifted it, the wrapping fell off. For a moment Bess stared at the thing in her hand, then gave a little cry and flung it from her.

Nancy hurried to pick up the object. "The rattle from a snake," she said, holding it up for the others to see.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Alice.

Nancy retrieved the wrapping paper. There was penciled writing on it. *"'Second warning!' "* she read aloud.

Nancy turned to the grim-faced ranch owner and his wife. "Now more than ever," she said earnestly, "I want to solve this mystery. Won't you let me stay and help you?"

The rancher looked at her pleading expression and smiled. "We could certainly use a detective. And I've got to hand it to you, Nancy —you sure can keep your head." He glanced at his wife. "What do you say, Bet?"

Elizabeth Rawley nodded soberly. "All right. The girls may stay, but they must promise to be very careful."

Eagerly they agreed and George hastened to the telephone in the hall to cancel the plane reservations which she had made. In the meantime, Mr. Rawley said he thought the notes and the snake rattle should be taken to the sheriff the next morning. “I’ll go, Mr. Rawley,” said Nancy. “Maybe I should meet him.”

When George returned, Mrs. Rawley was saying, “Nancy, I think you should call us Aunt Bet and Uncle Ed. After all, you’ll be one of our family.”

Nancy grinned. “I’d love that, Aunt Bet.”

“I wish you were going to work on my mystery, too,” Alice said wistfully.

Nancy took the young girl’s hand. “Of course I will,” she said kindly, and Alice’s blue eyes lit up.

Nancy told the Rawleys that she would like to get started with her sleuthing immediately. “May I question your men about the phantom horse?”

“Yes, indeed,” Ed Rawley agreed.

One after another the ranch hands were summoned, but none of them could add anything to the information Bess and George had given Nancy.

“All of these men are new here,” Mr. Rawley told her after they had gone. “But Walt Sanders, Tex, and Bud are from an outfit in the next county. Dave’s from Montana. Shorty’s a drifter.”

After a little more talk, Bess stifled a yawn, then suggested that the girls go to bed. She led the way out a side door and down a hall to their room. Alice went into the next one.

Before long Bess and George were asleep, but Nancy lay wide-eyed, wondering about Dave Gregory. Why was he so hostile to her? Could he be one of the saboteurs? And what about Shorty? Was he to be trusted? Finally Nancy fell asleep.

Just after midnight she awoke suddenly, startled by a noise on the portico. She sensed someone pausing at the door to listen. Then stealthy footsteps moved on.

“Now what was that all about?” Nancy asked herself.

Quickly she arose, put on robe and slippers, and cautiously opened the screen door.

No one was nearby, but at the far end of the portico, she saw a dark figure slip into the kitchen.

“Why would anyone be going in there from outdoors at this time of night?” Nancy asked herself. “I’d better find out.”

She wondered if she should awaken the other girls but decided against this, and tiptoed along the portico to the kitchen. She opened the door and stepped inside the dark room.

The next instant an unearthly shriek split the air and someone seized her!

CHAPTER IV

A Red Clue

NANCY jerked one arm free from the attacker and fumbled for a light switch. Her fingers found it and the ceiling lamp over the dining table went on.

Clinging to her was Mrs. Thurmond, the cook! She wore an old-fashioned nightgown, and her head bristled with curlers. She let go of Nancy like a hot branding iron.

"You!" she exclaimed.

"Yes me," Nancy replied, suppressing a smile. "I'm as surprised as you are, Mrs. Thurmond."

"What's the matter?" demanded Ed Rawley as he and his wife, wearing robes and slippers, hurried in from the living room.

Then Bess and George ran in from the portico, with Alice behind them. "Nancy! You all right?"

Soon Walt Sanders, in night clothes, rushed into the kitchen. A moment later Tex and Bud dumped in. Nancy wondered where Dave and Shorty were.

"Bud and I were on watch," said the red-haired cowboy, "and were checkin' the stable when we heard the ruckus. What's up?"

Mrs. Thurmond told her story. She had been asleep in her room, a small extension off the kitchen, when she had been awakened by someone coming into the kitchen through the screen door.

"I sleep light," she explained. "First I was afraid to move. I listened hard, but I didn't hear anything more, so I decided to get up and take a look. Just as I stepped out of my room, what do I see but the screen door opening and a dark figure steps in! So I jumped him and hollered."

Nancy smiled. "And I was 'him.' " Then she added, "There *was* an intruder here, Mrs. Thurmond, because I saw him come in."

"He must have gone into the living room, then," said Mrs. Rawley. "There's no other way out."

Mrs. Thurmond shook her head. "No, ma'am," she said forcefully. "That door to the living room squeaks and I didn't hear a sound."

George moved the door and the hinges made a noise.

"Then where did the intruder go?" Bess asked shakily.

Nancy's keen eyes had spotted a trap door beside the old-fashioned stove. "Perhaps down there."

"If he did," Ed Rawley said grimly, "he's caught. That's the cellar and this is the only way out. Dave," he ordered, looking beyond Nancy, "come with me."

From behind her stepped the tall cowboy. He was fully dressed and carrying a flashlight. She turned and saw Shorty Steele standing just inside the screen door. He, too, was in his working clothes. When had they arrived? And why hadn't they gone to bed after coming off patrol duty?

As Ed Rawley lifted up the trap door, Nancy said, "I'd like to go, too, Uncle Ed."

The man hesitated, then said, "All right, but you stay well behind us."

The cowboy turned on his flashlight and Nancy followed the men down a flight of wooden stairs. She found herself in a shallow cellar which was empty except for a row of shelves against one wall.

At Nancy's request Dave held his light downward so she could look for footprints. But the earth floor was hard-packed and she could see no marks on it.

When the trio returned to the kitchen and reported no sign of the intruder, the cook shook her head. "He was a phantom," she declared, "just like that horse."

"Now, Mrs. Thurmond," said Aunt Bet, "maybe you were so excited you didn't hear the intruder go through the living-room door."

The little woman looked indignant. "I have excellent hearing," she stated, "and that door *positively* did not squeak." Nancy found it hard to doubt Mrs. Thurmond's word.

The young sleuth turned to Dave. "Did you just come from the bunkhouse?"

"No," Dave said quietly. "I was doing some extra investigating."

"Whatever that means," Nancy thought. She noted that Shorty had

said nothing.

Mr. Rawley did not query the men. A few minutes later everyone went back to bed except Tex and Bud.

Nancy awoke at dawn and puzzled over the problem. Who was the intruder? What was he after? Where had he gone? Quietly she arose and dressed, then went to the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea.

Not wanting to heat the big kettle of water which stood on the old-fashioned range, she took a small pot from a hook on the wall and carried it to the sink. She turned one of the faucet handles, but no water came out. Surprised, Nancy tried the other, with the same result. "That's strange. I'll ask the girls about it."

She hurried to the bedroom and woke them. Bess and George said this had not happened before and George went to tell her aunt and uncle.

In a short time the hastily dressed rancher appeared, completely puzzled. He led the way past the stable and the corral to a small frame shed. Inside were an electric generator and pump.

After examining the machinery, Ed Rawley said one grim word, "Sabotage!" He showed the girls where some of the bearings were missing. "We'll need new ones before we can have any water."

"It's a shame!" George declared. "When do you think this mischief was done? And where were the guards?"

"What difference does it make?" her uncle said with a sigh. "The men can't be everywhere at once."

"What about Chief?" Nancy asked. "He didn't bark at the saboteur. Does this mean he knows him?"

Ed Rawley's jaw tightened. "I'd trust Sanders, Bud, and Dave with my life. They came highly recommended by friends of mine. As for the others, I accuse no man without proof."

"Nor would I," Nancy said quietly, and began looking for evidence. On the wooden floor were damp daubs of red earth. Outside the building was a wet patch of the same color, but the prints were too confused to be distinguishable.

"Whoever damaged the pump may still have this kind of mud on his boots," Nancy thought.

The rancher's face was gray with worry. "This pump will have to be fixed as soon as possible. After the windmill in the east meadow was wrecked, I had to start using this pump, which only supplied the house, to water my cattle. There's another mill in the big meadow, but

its supply is not enough for them. We're lucky to have one other source of spring water."

The three girls volunteered to carry water to the kitchen. They went to get buckets from Mrs. Thurmond, who was pale and tight-lipped. She handed them kettles and large pots. Bess led the way around the house to the spring house, a windowless adobe structure built onto the back wall of the kitchen.

George opened the heavy wooden door and the girls stepped down onto an earthen floor. It was cool and so dim they could barely see the small stream of water coming from a pipe in the center.

While waiting her turn to fill her kettle, Nancy went outside to look around. She saw that between the ranch house and the foot of Shadow Mountain ran a heavy strip of woods which continued along the big meadow.

"That's where the phantom horse is supposed to appear," Nancy reflected.

Just then Bess came from the spring house. "Your turn, Nancy," she called.

The young sleuth hurried inside and placed her kettle under the stream of water. While waiting for it to fill she noticed a stone vat against the kitchen wall. It was about three feet square with a hinged wooden lid. "That's where the old-timers stored milk products and eggs," she thought.

When Nancy reached the kitchen with her full kettle, Mrs. Thurmond was serving breakfast. As the girls sat down, Dave and Shorty came in. Nancy glanced at their boots. There was damp red mud on both pairs!

As soon as the men finished eating, Dave stood up. "I'm going to Tumbleweed to get pump bearings," he said to Nancy. "Mr. Rawley said you wanted to do an errand in town. You can ride along with me."

Nancy was glad the sheriff had not been mentioned. She said, "I'll go, thank you, and I'll bring George."

Dave scowled. "I'll be in the pickup," he replied abruptly and walked out.

Nancy hurried to her room to get the warning notes and the rattle. The pickup was parked in the yard, and as soon as Nancy and George had climbed into the cab, Dave started it.

Without saying a word, he drove out the ranch gate and turned onto

a dirt road which stretched down the valley. The girls appeared to be relaxed, but they could not rid their minds of a distrust of Dave.

Once he caught Nancy looking at his shoes. “Yes, Miss Detective,” he said, “that’s mud from outside the pump house. I was up before dawn this morning, and thought I heard a noise there. I didn’t find anyone, though. Must have scared off the pump-wrecker, but he came back later.”

George asked why Dave was up so early, but he did not answer or speak again until they reached a small town of old-fashioned frame buildings. The cowboy parked the pickup on the main street.

“I’ll meet you here in half an hour,” he said as he swung out of the truck. Nancy and George saw him go into a hardware store several doors away. Before them was a building with a sign: SHERIFF.

As the girls entered the small office a gray-haired man swiveled around in his chair and rose to greet them. “I reckon you’re Miss Drew,” he said in a pleasant drawl. “I’m Sheriff Curtis.” His eyes twinkled. “Ed Rawley told me you’re aimin’ to help him find what’s causin’ the trouble at the ranch.”

George spoke up. “And Nancy will, too.”

“I sure wish you luck.”

After hearing Nancy’s story and looking at the notes and rattle, he said, “I’ll hang on to these as evidence and phone the state and Phoenix law-men to keep an eye out for the hombre you saw at the airport. Keep me posted,” he added gravely, “and be extra careful, girls.”

Nancy thanked him and the callers left. They still had twenty minutes to spare. George said she wanted to purchase a cowboy kerchief in the general store, so Nancy strolled along looking in shop-windows. The town seemed almost deserted and many of the stores were not yet open.

Ahead, in the center of the street, grew a large cottonwood tree with a wooden bench built around the trunk. Nancy walked to it and was about to sit in the shade, when her eye was caught by a tall stack of Indian baskets outside the shop marked: MARY DEER—GIFTS.

Nancy crossed over to look at them, then glanced through the window. Startled at what she saw, Nancy almost cried out. The shop was empty, except for a man with a black kerchief covering his face to the eyes. He was crouching in front of an open glass case, scooping jewelry into a paper bag!

Heart pounding, Nancy looked up and down the street for help. But

there was no one in sight. Boldly she stepped to the open door of the shop.

"Drop that bag!" she ordered.

With a startled gasp the man whirled, then charged straight at her.

CHAPTER V

Desperado's Gift

THINKING quickly, Nancy jumped aside and toppled the tower of baskets into the thief's path. With a cry he stumbled among them and pitched forward, the bag of loot flying from his hand.

"Help!" shouted Nancy as she ran into the street and picked up the paper bag. "Sheriff!"

The man scrambled to his feet, and kicking the baskets aside, darted into a narrow passage between two stores.

At the same time, a young Indian girl and a man ran from the coffee shop next door.

"What happened?" cried the girl. "I'm Mary Deer." Quickly Nancy told her about the thief. "My shop—robbed!" she exclaimed.

"Almost robbed," said Nancy, smiling and handing over the brown paper bag. As the girl thanked her warmly, George, Dave, Sheriff Curtis, and a few merchants ran up. Nancy repeated her story rapidly and described the thief. "He wore a black kerchief over his nose and mouth, was in shirt sleeves, and had on dark trousers."

As the men dashed into the passage where he had vanished, Nancy turned to the Indian girl. She was wearing a vivid red beaded dress and had a glossy black braid over each shoulder. Nancy introduced herself and George.

Gratefully Mary Deer said, "You were wonderful to get this back for me, Nancy. I would like to give you a reward."

"That's not necessary. I'm glad I could help."

Mary Deer invited the girls into the shop, which was cool and smelled of leather goods. To one side stood a long glass case containing shelves of jewelry. One front panel was open and a shelf was empty.

"There's no lock on the case," Mary explained. "I guess I shouldn't have left the shop open, but I never expect customers this early." Then

she added, “Where are you from? You don’t sound like a Westerner.”

Nancy explained that she was a visitor at Shadow Ranch.

The Indian girl smiled. “Then I have the perfect reward for you.” She reached into the paper bag and took out a small gold object. It was a lady’s old-fashioned watch on a fleur-de-lis pin.

“How beautifull” Nancy exclaimed. “But I can’t accept it. Surely you can sell the watch.”

Mary Deer shook her head. “This is not for sale. I had it on display in my antique jewelry case. Since you are from Shadow Ranch, it shall be yours.”

“But what has the ranch to do with it?” Nancy asked, curious.

The Indian girl explained that the watch had been a gift to Frances Humber from her outlaw sweetheart. “Here is his initial,” she said, and pointed to a “V” and the date, June, 1880, inscribed on the back lid. Then she turned the watch over and showed Nancy a heart inscribed on the front. “That was Valentine’s symbol,” said Mary Deer. “Legend says he used it on personal belongings like his belt buckle and rings—even the brand on his horse was a heart.”

“He sounds like a romantic man,” remarked Nancy.

Mary agreed. “He left Frances a treasure,” she went on, “but she never received it.”

“A treasure?” Nancy said. “What was it?”

Mary shrugged. “Valentine’s will merely stated that his personal fortune was to go to Frances and her heirs. The will did not tell where or what the treasure was. Some believe it was hidden on Shadow Ranch.”

Nancy’s heart leaped with excitement. Maybe this could explain the sabotage at the ranch! “Someone wants to force the Rawleys off the property in order to search for the treasure,” she thought.

“Do many people know about this?” George asked.

“Nearly everybody around here has heard Valentine’s story, except the part about the treasure being hidden on the ranch, which is something that only a few old-timers believed.” Mary shook her head. “I doubt that the present owners of Shadow Ranch have ever heard about it.”

Carefully Nancy examined the gold watch. Perhaps there was a clue to the treasure in it! She pressed her nail against the edge and opened the lid, revealing the worn face of the watch.

“It still works,” said Mary. “The back lid opens, too.”

Nancy was disappointed to find that there was no picture or inscription inside either place.

“Where did you get the watch?” she asked.

“It was in a box of things I bought at an auction,” the Indian girl replied. She explained that the items had belonged to an old resident of Tumbleweed, Miss Melody Phillips, who had been a girlhood friend of Frances Humber. “She died in the East, and her parents, who still lived on the ranch, gave these mementos to Miss Melody. I know this history because it was written on the cover of the box.”

“Do you still have that?” Nancy asked eagerly.

The Indian girl shook her head regretfully. “I threw the box and the other items away since they were worthless. You must take the watch, Nancy,” she added earnestly. “Please.”

Not wanting to hurt the girl’s feelings, Nancy consented. As she was thanking her, Dave strode into the store. He reported that the thief had not been caught. “Sheriff says he’ll keep an eye out for him, Mary.”

“That’s good,” the young shop owner said, then showed Dave the watch. “I’m giving this to Nancy,” she added, and repeated the history of the timepiece.

Dave seemed to be interested and examined the watch closely. When he returned it, Mary pinned it shyly to Nancy’s blouse.

As the girls were leaving the shop with Dave, Nancy noticed a small pastel drawing propped up on the counter. “What a beautiful scenel” she remarked.

Mary said it was the work of an artist who lived on Shadow Mountain. Struck by the lovely Western landscape, Nancy bought the picture.

When the group walked outside, Nancy saw a tall man in black jacket and pants seated on the bench under the cottonwood tree. He wore a black ten-gallon hat, and his light-brown eyes followed Nancy as she passed him. It seemed to her that his gaze was fastened on the watch. Could he be the frustrated thief?

“He might have left his coat and hat somewhere,” Nancy reasoned, “and put them on again after his escape. But why should he be interested in the watch, unless he’s after the Humber treasure and hoped to find a clue in it?”

As Dave drove out of town, Nancy saw the tall stranger staring after

them. “The name of the ranch is on the side of the truck,” she thought uneasily. “If that man is after this watch, he’ll know just where to find me!”

Halfway to the ranch, the girls pointed out Indian cliff dwellings high on the mountain slope. Nancy asked if this was the area once owned by the Humbers and Dave nodded.

“Good place to look for curios like pieces of pottery,” George remarked.

“You girls stay away from there!” he advised sharply. When Nancy asked why, Dave explained that the stairs leading up from the valley floor were worn and broken. “Very dangerous,” he said.

When they reached the ranch, Dave parked the truck at the stable. The girls heard laughter coming from the corral and saw Tex Britten perched on the fence. Bess was mounted on a brown quarter horse and holding a coiled lariat.

“Watch me!” she called. “I’m learning to rope a steer.”

Nancy and George walked over and saw Bud Moore put his hands on his head like horns and prance in front of Bess’s horse. “Come on and rope me, pardner!” he said.

"Come and rope me, pardner!" Bud challenged Bess

Bess frowned, bit her lip, and managed to get a noose twirling. Then *plop*—it dropped over the head of her own horse!

Tex gave a piercing whistle. George and Nancy burst into laughter while the "steer" helped blushing Bess to dismount.

"Never mind," said Nancy. "You didn't want to be a cowboy, anyway!"

As the boys called joking remarks about the next roping lesson, the girls walked off together. At the house Nancy told Bess, Aunt Bet, and Alice all that had happened in town. She showed the watch and related its history.

"Shorty Steele is the one who told us the legend of the phantom horse," said Aunt Bet, "but he never mentioned the treasure. Maybe he doesn't know that part of the story."

"Or perhaps he kept it to himself," Nancy thought. Aloud she said, "Would it be all right if we hunt for the treasure?"

"By all means."

While the others were examining the old-fashioned watch, Nancy took the pastel picture from her bag and propped it on the living-room table.

Alice saw it and turned pale. "Nancy! Where did you get this?"

As Nancy explained, Alice picked up the painting. "My father did this—I'm sure of it!" She told them that Ross Regor was an amateur artist and always carried a small case of pastels with him. Whenever he had a few leisure minutes he devoted the time to sketching and Alice was positive she could recognize his work.

"We must find the artist," she said. "I just know he's my father!"

The others could not help feeling that Alice was clutching at straws. Nevertheless, Aunt Bet offered to take her young niece to town the next morning to question Mary Deer.

That night after supper Nancy slipped into a heavy jacket, took a flashlight, and went for a walk alone. She made her way past the stable, chicken coops, and corral to the edge of the big meadow. As she stood thinking, the wind whistled down the valley and tossed the treetops. Chief came padding over from the stable and nuzzled her hand.

Nancy turned and looked back. There was a light shining through a crack in the spring-house wall! "Who'd be there now?" she wondered.

As she hurried to investigate, one foot stepped on a large twig. *Crack!* In a moment the light went out!

Her sleuthing instincts aroused, Nancy tiptoed to the door, pulled it

open, and shone her light inside. Empty!

A shiver ran up Nancy's spine. It was impossible!

She walked away slowly, puzzling over the incident. Suddenly a long weird whistle sounded in the direction of the meadow. From among the bordering trees—as if in response to the whistle—galloped a white, filmy horse! The phantom!

CHAPTER VI

Shorty's Shortcut

FOR a moment Nancy froze at the sight of the ghostly steed galloping across the meadow. Then she raced toward the fence, calling the alarm.

At the same time a yell came from the stable. "Phantom—phantom!" It was Shorty's voice. "Saddle up, everybody!"

There were answering shouts as the cowboys appeared on the run and dashed to the stable. The other girls rushed up to Nancy who was staring tensely over the fence into the meadow. Chief joined the excited group. He began barking and made a beeline for the phantom horse, which had turned and seemed to be floating toward the far end of the meadow.

Soon the mounted ranchmen thundered out of the stable. Shorty took the lead. "Come on! This time we're gonna run that critter to earth!"

But the phantom horse was already far ahead of the pursuers. Only the dog was getting close. As the girls watched, the eerie figure reached the stand of trees at the far end of the meadow. In the wink of an eye it vanished.

Bess drew a shuddering breath. "The ghost's gone! Right into thin air!"

"Nonsense," George said gruffly.

"How can anything disappear like that?" asked Alice.

"It's amazing," Nancy admitted. "We should have been able to see it glowing among the trees for a few moments." Suddenly she remembered the prophecy that destruction would follow any appearance of the phantom. "Come on!" she exclaimed. "The real trouble is somewhere else."

She and the other girls hurried back to the house. All seemed quiet there. A glance into the kitchen showed Aunt Bet trying to calm Mrs.

Thurmond. The girls hastened on to their rooms.

With an exclamation of dismay Nancy stopped in the doorway. The room she shared with the cousins was a shambles! Pillows were ripped, blankets lay on the floor. All the drawers had been dumped. Alice ran next door to her room and came back to say that it had not been touched.

"Someone wants us to leave Shadow Ranch, all right," George declared.

"More than that," Nancy said thoughtfully. "Someone may be looking for Frances Humber's watch."

"But only we girls and the Rawleys know Mary Deer gave it to Nancy," Alice objected.

"You're forgetting the man in town," Nancy said, "and Dave. Both were very much interested in it."

"Well, where is the watch?" asked Bess, looking fearful.

"I'm wearing it," said Nancy, "under my sweater." Before supper she had changed to a yellow blouse and skirt with a matching slipover.

While she and Bess and George began to clear up the mess, Alice hurried to the kitchen to tell her aunt and Mrs. Thurmond what had happened. They hurried back to help. By the time the beds were made again and the pillows replaced with spare ones, the men had returned.

"The phantom got away," Ed Rawley said gloomily. "Chief was at his heels, but he has not come back and it worries me."

"I'm sorry," said Nancy. "I'm afraid we have other bad news for you." Quickly she reported what had happened.

"The purpose of the phantom is clear," she declared. "It's to frighten you and attract attention to the meadow while the real damage is being done somewhere else."

"If we could only catch the thing, it would surely give us a clue to who is doing all this," Ed Rawley said, and Nancy agreed.

The next morning at breakfast Dave reported that Chief still had not returned.

"The phantom got him, poor dog," Mrs. Thurmond said dolefully. "Same as it will get us all."

As soon as the meal was over, Nancy said she was going out for a canter. She put on riding clothes and hastened to the stable where Tex saddled a handsome bay for her. Nancy was a skillful rider and she enjoyed the gallop in the meadow looking for clues to the phantom.

But whatever marks it had left had been obscured by the pursuing horsemen.

At the far end of the field, Nancy rode into a stand of cottonwood where the strange creature had vanished. Here she found a path which led to the foot of the mountain and up the slope. Had the phantom gone that way?

Nancy reined her horse about and hurried to the ranch house, where she rounded up Bess and George. “Want to join me in a search party?”

“You bet,” her friends chorused.

Shorty offered to lead them and within half an hour the four riders were following the path up the mountain.

It was a steep, high climb. All was silent, except for the creak of the saddles and the clop of the horses’ hooves on the stones. Finally the path leveled off and they came to a narrow stream, which they splashed across.

“This is just a crick now,” said Shorty. “But come one good cloudburst—and it’ll turn into a roarin’ flood so bad only a river horse could cross it. That’s the kind you’re ridin’ now. They’re big and don’t get rattled—know how to swim with the current.”

Near noon Nancy suddenly reined up. “Listen!” she said. Somewhere among the rocks overhead a dog was barking. Apache Chief?

Within a moment George glimpsed the roof of a cabin among the crags above. “Maybe Chief’s up there!” she exclaimed.

Nancy observed that it looked as though the path they were on would lead to the cabin.

“I know a shortcut. Come with me,” Shorty said quickly.

He rode ahead and led them to a side path. He explained to the girls that the other route became impassable farther up the mountain. After they had ridden for fifteen minutes Shorty stopped, pulled off his hat, and wiped his forehead with his bandanna.

“I gotta confess we strayed onto the wrong trail.” He shrugged. “No use goin’ back up. Get-tin’ too late. We better make tracks for the ranch.”

Disappointed, Nancy and her friends followed him along a new trail which eventually rejoined the first path. They reached Shadow Ranch in midafternoon.

When they dismounted in front of the stable, Shorty said, “I’m mighty sorry we didn’t find that dog.”

Nancy replied, “So am I.” She could not help suspecting that Shorty had pretended to be lost and deliberately kept them away from the cabin. She made up her mind to go back. The three girls discussed the possibility of his having double-crossed them.

“I’ll bet he did!” George declared.

At the house they found Alice waiting for them, her face glowing. “Nancy,” she cried out, “Mary Deer says the artist’s name is Bursey and he lives in a cabin on Shadow Mountain!” The older girls exchanged meaningful looks.

“Alice,” Nancy said happily, “I think I know where it is. We’ll go there tomorrow. Maybe we’ll find Chief, too.”

That night Alice came to the girls’ room. She was puzzled. If the artist *was* her father, why was Chief with him?

“I wish I could answer,” said Nancy. “And, Alice dear, please don’t get your hopes up too high. It may not be the cabin where the artist lives, although I have a hunch it’s connected with the mystery of Shadow Ranch.”

As Nancy spoke, she was turning the old-fashioned watch over in her hand. Absently she ran her finger along the front edge and suddenly felt a tiny obstruction. She pushed it and instantly a thin lid sprang forward.

“Why—it’s a secret compartment!” she exclaimed.

On the top side of the lid was the small faded photograph of a handsome man with flowing dark hair.

“That must be Dirk Valentine!” Nancy cried, and showed it to the other girls. In the frame next to the picture of the man was a tiny corner from another picture.

“That one’s been torn out,” said Alice.

“It must have been a photo of Frances Humber,” Bess observed.

Carefully Nancy removed the old picture. On the back in faded ink was the initial “V.” In tiny script under it were the words: *“green bottle in—”*

“In *where?”* asked George.

“Perhaps the place is named on the back of the missing photograph,” Nancy suggested.

“Let me see it,” Bess requested.

Nancy handed her the watch. Bess looked it over carefully. Finally she sighed, replaced the picture, and put the timepiece on the dresser. “What can that odd message mean? If—”

At that moment the girls heard a dog whining. It came from somewhere in the darkness beyond the portico.

Alice jumped up. “Listen!” she exclaimed. “Maybe that’s Chief!”

CHAPTER VII

Rockslide!

THE girls dashed onto the portico but could not see the big German shepherd.

"Here, Chief!" Nancy called.

From the dark yard came an answering whine, but the dog did not appear.

"Maybe he's hurt," said Bess as they walked toward the sound. Whines and barks filled the air as the searchers called again and again, but each time the sounds seemed farther away and definitely were coming from the big meadow. The girls reached the fence. Though they called repeatedly, there was only silence.

"Why wouldn't Chief come to us?" Alice asked.

The same question had been troubling Nancy, and the answer flashed into her mind. "Perhaps there wasn't any dog! Maybe someone imitated him to get us out of our room."

Bess gave a gasp of alarm. "Nancy! Your watch! I left it on the dresser!"

Hoping they would not be too late, the girls ran back to their room. All sighed in relief. The watch was still on the dresser!

"Thank goodness!" said Bess. "If it had disappeared I never would have forgiven myself."

George said, "We were gone long enough for someone to lift out Valentine's picture and look at the writing on it."

Nancy examined the picture carefully, but could detect no sign of its having been removed.

Alice spoke up. "What do you think those words on the back of the photograph mean, Nancy?"

The young detective thought they might be a clue to the treasure. "Valentine may have given the watch to Frances for a double purpose

—as a gift and a way to tell her secretly where his treasure was hidden."

"You mean it's in a green bottle?" Bess asked incredulously.

Nancy shook her head. "More likely the bottle contains directions to it. Let's look over Aunt Bet's bottle collection."

She pinned the watch onto her blouse and hurried to the living room with the others. Nancy showed Mrs. Rawley the clue in the secret compartment, and asked if any of the bottles in her collection had been found on the premises.

"Two," said the woman. "And one of them is green!"

The girls went to the window with her and she removed a dark-green, narrow-necked bottle from the top shelf.

"It was for liniment," she said, handing it to Nancy. "The old Western miners and ranchers used a lot of it. Collectors are always looking for those antique bottles. I found this one in an old shed behind the stable."

Nancy removed the stopper, turned the bottle over, and shook it, but nothing fell out. Nancy asked Alice to bring a knitting needle from her bag. When she returned, the girl detective probed into the bottle with the long needle.

"It's empty," was her verdict.

"We'll have to start searching the ranch for other bottles," said Bess.

That night Nancy went to sleep wondering if someone else might also be looking for the green bottle. The answer came after breakfast next morning as she crossed the living room. The green liniment bottle was gone from the window shelf!

Nancy searched the other shelves at once, but in vain. It was obvious that the dog whining had been a trick and someone had read the clue on the back of Valentine's picture!

Just then Dave passed the portico door. Nancy called him in and asked what time he had taken guard duty the night before.

"Eight o'clock to midnight," he replied. "Why?"

"Just wondering. Did you hear a dog whine in the yard or see anyone?"

Dave had heard the dog but seen no one. When he had reached the yard, there had been no sign of the animal.

"Again, why?" The cowboy regarded Nancy quizzically.

“It was a trick to get us outside so someone could snoop in my room,” Nancy replied. She looked him straight in the eye, and he met her gaze without flinching.

“I think you’re right,” he said, and added quietly, “Be careful, Nancy. You’re on dangerous grounds.” He turned and walked away.

Was it a threat, or a well-meant warning? Nancy could not make up her mind. Although Dave was gruff, Nancy liked his straightforward manner.

“I must tell Aunt Bet about this,” the young sleuth thought.

The ranchwoman and her nieces were disturbed to hear about the missing bottle, but Mrs. Rawley commented with a smile, “The thief must have hated himself for his trouble when he found out there was nothing in the bottle!”

“That’s right,” Bess agreed. “But he’ll go on looking for green bottles and he just may find the right one before Nancy does.”

Her detective friend grinned. “Let’s not give him a chance!”

As the girls changed to riding togs, Aunt Bet told them of a ghost town on Shadow Mountain. “It’s possible Mr. Bursey lives there,” she said. “You might go to it first, then circle around and on the way back visit the cabin where you think the dog is.” She drew a map, then warned, “Be back by sundown. Mountain trails are treacherous after dark.”

Nancy took her pocket compass and the girls picked up the lunch Mrs. Thurmond had packed for them. Then they hurried to the stable.

Tex gave them the same horses they had ridden the day before, plus a large roan mare named Choo-Choo for Alice. But when the slender girl was astride, she began to giggle.

Tex, too, chuckled. “I don’t think I can shorten those stirrups enough for you, Missy,” he said. “We’d better put you on a smaller animal.”

Bess volunteered to give Alice the horse she was about to mount and the switch was made.

“Choo-Choo’s a perfectly good trail animal,” Tex said. “Only thing is, she’s no river horse.”

“I’ll remember,” said Bess.

With Nancy in the lead, the riders cut across the big meadow at a gallop and started up the mountain trail. Nancy followed Aunt Bet’s map, and after a long, hot climb, the girls sighted a group of weather-

beaten frame buildings clinging to the slope above.

As they rode into the streets of the ghost town they were struck by the silence and the bleached look of the sagging buildings. In front of a dilapidated hotel they dismounted and tied their horses to an old hitching rail. As they stepped onto the board sidewalk, Alice exclaimed sharply:

"Look!" In front of her lay a crushed blue crayon. "It's a pastel!"

Nancy dropped to her knees and examined the colored powder. "This is fresh," she said with excitement. "It hasn't been scattered by the wind or mixed with dust."

Beyond the vivid splotch she saw smaller traces of blue and followed them swiftly to the end of the street. Below her, on the rocky mountain slope, she saw two men running.

In a moment they disappeared into a cluster of large boulders. Alice and the others dashed up behind Nancy just too late to see them. Though the girls watched, the men did not reappear.

"I just know one of them was my father," Alice moaned. "He must have dropped the crayon. Oh, Nancy, why do you suppose they ran away? Do you think he's a captive?"

"I don't know yet," Nancy replied. "But I mean to find out."

"Come on. Let's search the town," George urged. "We'll see if there's any sign of an artist living here. If he is, he'll come back."

Alice agreed, and the four separated in order to cover the ground more quickly. Nancy picked a tall house perched precariously halfway up the slope. She entered cautiously and found the first-floor rooms bare. Gingerly she climbed the rickety stairs.

In the front room she found only a broken brass bedstead. Casually she looked out the window. On the ground was the long shadow of a man with a big hat! Apparently he was standing around the comer of the building.

Nancy ran to another window and saw the shadow moving toward the rear. She hurried to the back of the building and looked out onto a steep rocky slope. Suddenly among the big boulders on the hillside she spotted the figure in a black ten-gallon hat. He was climbing upward.

Nancy's heart pounded. Was he the man from Tumbleweed? Did he know she was in the building? If, as she suspected, he was part of the plot at Shadow Ranch, he may have come here to ambush the girls!

"Perhaps I can turn the tables and find out what he's up to," she said to herself. But Nancy realized that she might be cornered in the

old building and knew she must get out.

Quickly she started down the shaky stairs. Suddenly there came a rumble, growing louder. For an instant Nancy thought it was thunder, and paused, then she realized the truth.

“A rockslide!” she cried out, but the words were lost in the roar as the entire building was jolted from its foundation!

CHAPTER VIII

Escaped Dog

NANCY lurched against the balustrade. Trying to catch her balance, she grabbed the rail. With a loud crash the whole framework broke and she plunged through to the floor below! Stunned, Nancy hardly noticed that the roar of the rockslide had subsided and the old building had come to a shuddering halt. After a while she became aware of voices calling.

"Nancy! Nancy, are you in there?" came Bess's frantic voice.

"I see her!" George's deeper tones were coming closer. As Nancy managed to sit up, she saw that the floor now slanted steeply downhill, and her friends were crawling up toward her.

"Oh, Nancy, are you all right?" Bess asked anxiously.

Nancy managed a shaky smile. "I think I'm just bruised. Now that I've caught my breath, I'll be fine."

George and Bess helped her to her knees.

"We'll have to crawl down," said George. "And the sooner the better. This building might start to slide again."

Nancy and her friends held their breaths and gingerly crawled backward down the slanting floor to the door. The sill was now almost waist-high. As they climbed out, Nancy saw that the building had slipped down to the road.

Alice, carrying a coil of rope, came hurrying up to them. "Oh, Nancy, thank goodness you're all right!" she exclaimed. She explained that George had sent her back to the horses for the rope in case they needed it.

Nancy looked uneasily up at the rocky slope behind the wrecked house. She squinted her eyes against the glare of the sun but could detect nothing moving.

"What do you think caused the rockslide?" George asked.

Nancy told the girls of having seen the man in the black hat. “Maybe he started a boulder rolling,” she suggested.

“On purpose?” Bess asked, horrified.

“Perhaps,” said Nancy. “I have a feeling it’s the same man George and I saw in Tumbleweed. If he’s after Valentine’s treasure, this is one more move to scare us off the ranch.”

George reminded her that no doubt there were other men in the county with large black hats.

“I know,” Nancy admitted. She wondered whether the man had followed them there or had been disturbed by their coming.

The other girls said that so far they had found no signs of anyone living in the abandoned village. At Nancy’s suggestion they started down the street, and without entering, looked into the few buildings that they had not already checked.

All the while Bess kept glancing over her shoulder to see if anyone were following them. When they reached the end of the street, she and George peered into a tumble-down blacksmith’s shop.

Suddenly there was a rustling noise. Bess jumped back and squealed as something scurried past her.

“Really, Bess,” George said in disgust, “you’re hopeless. That was only a pack rat.”

Bess blushed. “I can’t help it. I keep expecting the man in black to jump out at us.”

Nancy spoke up. “I think Bess has a point We’d better get out of here. If the man is still around he just might cause another rockslide.”

In a few minutes the girls had mounted their horses and were riding out of town.

“Are we going straight to the cabin now?” Alice asked anxiously. “Perhaps the men we saw were on their way to it.”

“Yes,” said Nancy. As soon as they were clear of the dilapidated buildings she reined in and studied the map Aunt Bet had given her. After consulting the compass, she led the girls around the back of Shadow Mountain on a narrow trail. Now and then they passed a tall, creamy yucca flower in bloom or startled a bird from a thicket of chaparral. But they saw no other living creatures.

Near noon the riders reached a level place where a cluster of high rocks cast shade over a shallow stream. Here they dismounted, watered their horses, and ate lunch. An hour later the girls were in the

saddle again and presently rounded a rock outcrop. They found themselves looking up at a small cabin set among the rocks some distance from them. As the horses climbed toward it, their iron shoes rang against the rock and some of the loose stones clattered down the hill behind them. Suddenly a dog began to bark, then stopped.

"That sounded like Chief!" Bess exclaimed.

While still some distance from the cabin, the riders dismounted.

"Bess and Alice, will you stay with the horses?" Nancy requested. "George and I will take a look around."

The two girls walked stealthily up the hill and started to circle the cabin. They found that the rear wall was close to the side of the mountain and heavily overgrown with brush and small fern. There was an open window in the back wall, but a heavy burlap sack was hanging across it so the girls could not see inside. They stood still for a moment and listened, but no sound came from within. Quietly they completed the circle and returned to the others.

"The door's open a little bit," Bess said softly. "Do you think anybody's inside?"

"There's only one way to find out," Nancy said with determination. "I'll go and knock."

As she started up the hill, the barking started again. The next instant, from behind the cabin, bounded a large black German shepherd.

"Chief!" the girls exclaimed.

The dog greeted them with frenzied barking and tail wagging. A short piece of rope hung from his collar. On his head was a swelling and broken skin.

"You poor old fellow!" said Nancy. She knelt beside the dog and calmed him, then carefully felt around the wound. "Someone knocked him out and has been holding him!" she said.

"But why?" asked Bess, keeping a wary eye on the cabin.

"Maybe because he got too close to the phantom horse," Nancy replied.

George looked puzzled. "What difference would that make? Chief can't talk."

"But maybe there's a clue on him—something to show how the trick was done," Nancy replied. The big dog stood patiently as Nancy examined him, but she found nothing unusual.

Bess volunteered to stay with the horses and the dog while the other girls went to the cabin. The trio walked up to it and Nancy knocked on the doorframe. There was no answer. She knocked again, then pushed the door open cautiously.

The one-room cabin was empty, but plainly had been lived in. On the table stood two mugs and a coffeepot.

Alice darted forward with a cry. Beside the cups lay an unfinished drawing and a pastel crayon.

“My father! He’s been here!”

The mugs were half full of coffee. Nancy felt them. They were still warm.

“The artist and his companion have been here, all right,” Nancy agreed. “And they left just a short time ago.”

“Why would they do that?” George asked. “Unless they heard us coming and have some reason to hide.”

“My father’s being held prisoner,” Alice said positively. She glanced at the older girls and read their thoughts. “You think he’s connected with the phantom mystery because we found Chief here,” she accused.

Nancy tried to assure her this was not the case. “Your father is innocent, but someone else occupying this cabin may be connected with the Shadow Ranch mystery.”

Leaving the door slightly open as they had found it, the three hurried to report to Bess.

“The men may come back. Let’s wait here and see,” Nancy suggested.

The girls led their horses behind a clump of large boulders, out of sight of the cabin. Keeping Chief beside her, Nancy hid behind the screen of chaparral with the other girls and watched the cabin.

While they waited Nancy puzzled over the dog’s appearance. He had run from behind the cabin, yet minutes before she and George had passed between it and the mountain without seeing or hearing the animal. It occurred to Nancy that he might have been tied up some distance away and broken loose.

But why had he been held? There seemed to be no lead to the phantom on him. “Perhaps it was only because his captor is not averse to stealing a good dog.”

The afternoon wore on. It was hotter and increasingly cloudy. The men did not return.

Finally Nancy cast a worried look at the sky. “We must start back before it rains.”

Alice begged to stay, but the other girls knew this was not wise. Nancy promised her they would come again.

With Chief at the heels of Nancy’s horse, the girls started down the mountain, following a path which the River Heights visitors soon recognized as the trail they had been on the day before.

“So this path to the cabin is not impassable, after all,” said George, “as Shorty had claimed.”

Nancy remarked that the cowboy might have been mistaken, yet she admitted that his behavior certainly made him a strong suspect in the mystery.

As the girls rode along, the sun vanished and a chill wind set in. Suddenly a few large drops of rain splattered into the dust. The next moment a downpour descended.

The horses snorted. A vivid flash of lightning split a fir tree some distance up the mountain and the horses shied at the clap of thunder.

“Sit tight!” Nancy called over her shoulder, “and keep moving.”

Moment by moment, the cloudburst worsened and the trail gradually became slippery mud. Far below in the valley they could see the sunlit meadow, untouched by the storm.

“I hope we make it,” Bess said fearfully.

Suddenly Nancy had a chilling thought. They still had to negotiate the stream which they had crossed the previous day. And Bess’s mount was not a river horse! She dare not urge her own mount faster, for the animal was picking his footing carefully. Yet, with each precious minute, she knew that the stream was rising.

When they reached its bank the four girls gazed in consternation at the rushing water.

“We can’t cross that!” Bess wailed.

Nancy said the only alternative was to stay all night on the mountain. “And we’re not equipped to do that. It’s too risky. Come on, Bess. We can make it if we hurry!”

As she spoke, Chief whined and put his paw into her stirrup.

“He’s begging for a ride,” George said.

The dog leaped to a large rock beside the water and Nancy pulled up close to him. With her help Chief squeezed onto the front of the saddle and Nancy held him there.

“All right, boy,” she whispered to him. “Here we go!”

She gathered the reins firmly and guided her horse into the water. The big animal did not fight the current, but swam along easily with it, heading gradually for the opposite bank. Before long, he found footing. As he clambered safely ashore, Chief jumped off and Nancy turned in the saddle to see how the others were faring.

One by one the big, dependable river horses made the crossing safely, but Bess, on Choo-Choo, was last. Would he behave? The animal entered the stream and walked until the water swirled around his shoulders. Then he stopped.

“If he doesn’t swim he’ll be swept away!” George exclaimed.

“Help!” called Bess. “He won’t move!”

With the torrent rising fast, Nancy spurred her mount along the bank until she was some distance above Bess. Then she guided her horse into the turbulent water.

“Hold on, Bess! We’re coming!”

Suddenly, a few yards upstream, part of the muddy bank collapsed, sending a huge surge of water sweeping over Nancy and her horse!

CHAPTER IX

Tack Room Prisoner

KEEPING a firm grip on the reins, Nancy stuck tight to the saddle. In a few moments her mount steadied himself and began to swim toward Bess's horse. When they drew close, Nancy seized Choo-Choo's reins. While the frightened girl clung to the saddle, her horse was towed to shore.

"Oh, Nancy!" she exclaimed. "You were wonderful. You saved us!"

Nancy still looked worried. "We can't stay here," she said. "We're not out of trouble yet. I'm afraid the trail down is going to be slippery and wet."

George grimaced. "What's the hurry? We can't get any wetter than we are."

The girls looked at one another. Despite the situation, they could not repress giggles. All were drenched and mud-spattered, with water streaming from their hair.

"You're lucky Bud isn't here to see you," George teased Bess as Nancy led the way down the trail.

Bess shivered and made a face at her cousin. "I know I must be a sight," she said. "I can tell by looking at the rest of you."

George's joke had served to relieve the tension and now the girls applied themselves to guiding their horses down the precarious trail. As they reached the bottom, the rain stopped, and the sun emerged hot and bright.

From there on the trip was easier. By the time they reached the big meadow, their clothes were almost dry.

Chief raced ahead to the stable, barking madly. Bess groaned. "Oh, he's making so much noise he'll bring out a reception committee and everybody' ll see us!"

Nancy smiled at the remark, then warned the others to say nothing about the man in the black ten-gallon hat or the other two men to

anyone except the Rawleys.

When the girls rode up to the corral, Dave and Tex and Bud were waiting there for them.

"Where did you find Chief?" asked Dave. He surveyed their bedraggled condition but made no comment.

Tex said, "Looks like you girls got caught in a little mountain sprinkle."

Bud grinned and said, "That was nothing. Wait till you all get caught in a real Western-style rain."

"No thanks," Bess retorted.

"We'll tell you all about the dog later," Nancy promised. The girls hastily dismounted and fled to the house.

After hot showers they dressed for supper. Nancy wore a powder-blue sweater and skirt, and brushed her titian hair until it gleamed. George wore a smart dark-green linen dress. She was ready long before Bess, who wore a yellow sweater and skirt and changed her hair-do three times.

"I want to look extra nice," Bess said, "to make up for the extra awful way I looked this afternoon."

Before supper, the girls sat down in the living room with the Rawleys and told them of their afternoon's adventures. Nancy passed lightly over the stream-crossing incident, but Bess refused to let the matter drop. When everyone had gathered around the table, she bragged of Nancy's bravery. Nancy, always embarrassed by praise, changed the subject as soon as possible.

When the meal was over, Dave called Nancy aside on the portico. "I owe you an apology," he said soberly. "That was a mighty fine thing you did this afternoon. I see now that you're not the tenderfoot nuisance I thought you were going to be."

Nancy smiled. "This is the first time since I arrived that you've been friendly. Are you always so gruff to newcomers?"

He flushed. "No, but I—" He hesitated. "Well, I had a special reason."

Before Nancy could ask him what it was, he said, "I have to go now. We'll talk again later."

Dave swung off the portico and headed toward the corral. Nancy watched him disappear into the dusk, puzzled by his remarks. Was he guilty of something or not? She was aware that Ed Rawley trusted

him. On the other hand, she had no proof that Dave had been telling the truth about the mud on his shoes.

She reminded herself that he knew about Frances Humber's watch and therefore had a reason to trick the girls out of their room and later take the old green bottle.

"Did Dave apologize in order to allay my suspicions of him?" she wondered.

As Nancy started toward the living room she met the other girls and Aunt Bet coming out.

"We're going to a drive-in movie," said Alice. "Want to come along?"

"I'd love to," Nancy replied, "but I think I'd better stay at home and keep watch." Bess and George offered to remain with her, but Nancy urged them to go on.

As Mrs. Rawley and the girls walked toward the ranch wagon, Nancy hurried to her bedroom. She changed into riding clothes, picked up a flashlight, and then headed for the stable. She had decided to saddle her mount and be ready to ride in case the phantom horse should appear. The young sleuth was determined to catch the ghost horse or examine its tracks before they were obscured by other pursuers.

As Nancy reached the stable, Dave came out leading a horse which he mounted at once. He carried a flashlight. "Just checking up," he said to her. "Snooping again?"

"Yes," Nancy replied. Quickly she changed the subject by asking whether anyone kept watch in the big meadow at night for the phantom.

"No," was the reply. "Shorty and I have the first patrol, while Tex keeps watch on the windmill and Bud stands guard at the east meadow. When it's their turn to ride patrol, Shorty and I will switch jobs with them."

He added, "The foreman is riding fence in the east meadow—we even have to do it at night now. That way the cattle will be guarded twenty-four hours a day."

Dave rode off and Nancy went through the stable into the tack room, a long frame building attached to it. She turned on her flashlight and saw rows of saddles hanging from the walls and bundles of blankets stacked on shelves.

After crossing the room, she lifted one of the saddles from the wall.

Above it hung a bridle and bit which Nancy also took down, then picked up a saddle blanket. Turning back, she was surprised to see that the door was closed.

Nancy hurried over, put her gear on the ground, and tried the door. It was locked! She remembered having seen a padlock hanging loose in the hasp outside. Had someone locked her in by mistake?

Nancy pounded on the door and shouted, but no one came. Suddenly she realized that under the guard system no one would be within hearing distance of her voice. Grimly Nancy wondered if Dave had locked her in. Had he guessed her plan and done it to foil her?

"I must get out of here!" Nancy thought desperately.

She played her flashlight around the long room and saw one window high in the wall. "I can squeeze through, if I can find a way to reach it."

At one end of the room Nancy placed a pile of blankets under the window. Then she stacked saddles on top until she was sure of reaching the window.

Nancy climbed the unsteady pile and tried to push up the sash. The window was locked. She found the catch and managed to turn it. Once again she tried to open the window, but it was stuck tight. Disappointed, she made her way down to the floor.

"Maybe I can find a pole and force the window up," she thought.

"I must get out of here!" Nancy thought desperately

Her flashlight revealed an iron crowbar in one corner. She dragged it back beneath the window, climbed up again, and tried to force the

sash open. As she struggled with it she could see the kitchen end of the house and the spring house.

Suddenly the window budged, and at the same moment, Nancy saw a gleam of light through a crack in the spring-house wall. With a gasp of surprise she let the crowbar fall, climbed out the window, hung for a moment from the sill, then dropped several feet to the ground.

As she hit the earth there was a sharp yelp to her left, and Chief ran toward her, barking loudly. “Hush!” Nancy said.

She patted the dog and tried to quiet him. “Stay here,” she ordered, and he sat down obediently while Nancy ran toward the spring house.

When she was halfway there, the light went out. As she reached the door, Mr. Rawley came running from around the kitchen end of the house.

“What is it, Nancy? What’s the matter?” he asked.

Quickly she told him what she had seen. “No one came out,” she concluded.

“Then whoever had a light there must still be inside,” he declared, and pulled open the heavy wooden door.

Nancy shone her flash inside. The spring house was empty!

CHAPTER X

Hidden Entrance

"I just can't believe it!" Nancy exclaimed. "No one could have come out. I could see the door all the while I was running toward it."

Ed Rawley looked at Nancy. "I'm sure you didn't imagine seeing the light. This worries me."

Nancy told him of the similar experience she had had the day before. "Perhaps there's a secret exit," she suggested.

Using her flashlight, Nancy examined the walls of the spring house, but found they were solid adobe. It occurred to her that there might be a wooden trap door and a passageway under the earthen floor. She looked for any sign of seams in the earth. There were none. Nancy gave a baffled sigh and glanced at the stone vat.

"No use bothering with that," said Mr. Rawley. "It's too small to hide in and too heavy to be moved in a hurry. Whoever escapes from here does it in a twinkling."

As Nancy and the rancher left the spring house, she gazed uneasily toward the meadow. "The last time I saw the light, the phantom horse appeared out there," she remarked.

"I'll alert my men to watch for more sabotage," Uncle Ed said quickly. "And I'll take one off patrol duty to stand guard here at the spring house all night."

He hurried away. Nancy stood watching the dark meadow, puzzling over the problem of the disappearing light. The phantom horse did not appear and finally she returned to the house.

Nancy went to the living room, lighted a lamp, and sat down alone to think over the mystery. How could someone disappear from the spring house without using the exit? Suddenly she remembered that a prowler had done the same thing from the cellar of the house.

Nancy jumped up excitedly. "Of course that's the answer," she told herself. "The spring house is next to the kitchen and the cellar is under

it! There must be a hidden passage from one to the other."

She hastened out of the house and around the comer, but stopped short. A shadowy figure was lounging outside the spring house. It was Dave on guard. Nancy decided against examining the spring house again that night.

On the way back she glanced into the kitchen. Mrs. Thurmond was seated at the big table, reading a magazine. Next to her was Bud Moore. He saw Nancy at the door.

"Howdy," he said. "Mr. Rawley changed me into a house guard tonight, so you gals can sleep easy."

"That's great. Thanks."

Nancy smiled, but inwardly she was disappointed. "Now I can't investigate the cellar, either," she thought, "with Bud around."

Nancy awoke at dawn. She dressed quickly and slipped out of the house. To her relief, there was no longer anyone on guard at the spring house. She stepped inside and walked to the kitchen wall. Nancy lifted the lid of the vat and looked in. It was empty.

Nancy knelt and began to feel the bottom of the vat. Along the front edge her fingers suddenly encountered a piece of cord and opposite it another piece. Nancy pulled on them and the bottom moved. As she yanked harder, the floor of the vat lifted a few inches. It was made of wood, which had been covered with gray plaster to look like stone!

Before Nancy could lift it higher, she heard footsteps outside. Quickly she dropped the bottom and closed the vat. She had just time to grab a tin cup and hold it under the stream of water before the wooden door opened. Nancy turned and saw Shorty standing there.

For a moment he was speechless with surprise. "Wal," he exclaimed, "you're sure up mighty early, miss!"

"Yes, I am," Nancy said with a smile, then excused herself and left the spring house. As she strolled off, she could feel Shorty's eyes on her.

Nancy knew that the ranch hands rose early. "Did Shorty intend to get a drink of water? Or did he see me go in and come to find out what I was doing?"

Excited by her discovery in the spring house, Nancy could hardly wait for her friends to awaken so she could tell them about it.

At the news George sat up straight in bed. "That's something!" she exclaimed. "You've found the secret entrance to the cellar!"

"I *think* so," Nancy replied. "It was still kind of dark and I raised the bottom only a few inches. There just might be a hidden compartment under the false floor. Let's not tell anyone until we're sure."

Bess said, "Good idea."

The girls dressed in jeans and shirts, hoping to investigate the mysterious vat very soon. But at breakfast Foreman Sanders ruined the plan.

"Two of the men will be working on the pump most of the day," he announced. "It hasn't been right since the damage was done."

Before the meal was over, Nancy asked with a smile, "Who locked me in the tack room last night by mistake?"

There was silence in the kitchen. Nancy learned nothing. No one wore a guilty expression.

In midmorning Mr. Rawley asked the four girls if they would like to go with him to Tumbleweed. They all accepted eagerly and piled into the ranch wagon, with Dave at the wheel.

On the way, Uncle Ed told them he was going to the stockyards to pick up a dozen fine palominos for breeding. He had ordered and paid for the horses sometime before. "It's a big investment." He frowned. "I just hope nothing happens to them."

Dave drove straight through town and parked on the outskirts in front of the stockyards. As Nancy got out of the car she noticed a sign on the fence: TUMBLEWEED RODEO. BARBECUE AND SQUARE DANCE. SATURDAY.

Dave called her aside. "Will you go to the barbecue and square dance with me?"

Surprised, Nancy hesitated for a moment.

"Please do," he added earnestly. "Bess and George promised Tex and Bud they would go. We can make it a triple date."

"Okay. Thank you," she replied.

"Good," he said, then excused himself and hurried into the stockyard after Uncle Ed.

Meanwhile, the girls walked around the enclosures, looking at the animals. The visitors were attracted to a small corral where a man was offering trained horses for sale. The girls walked to the fence and joined the cowboys and ranchers who were watching a little chestnut mare perform.

Her master stood in the center of the ring and gave various whistles.

In response the horse pranced, reared, and kneeled. At the final whistle the mare ran to him and took a piece of sugar from his hand.

"Isn't she darling?" Bess murmured.

As the girls strolled away they saw Dave near one of the horse enclosures. Nancy asked him if she had time to take Bess, George, and Alice to Mary Deer's shop.

"Sure," he replied. "Go ahead. We'll pick you up there in the ranch wagon."

The girls walked down Main Street and turned into the gift shop. A tall man was standing at the counter, talking to Mary. As he turned around, Nancy stopped short in surprise. He was the man in black she had seen near the shop after the attempted robbery!

Mary greeted the girls warmly and Nancy introduced Bess, George, and Alice. The Indian girl presented the tall man as Mr. Diamond, one of her best customers.

He smiled at Nancy smoothly. "Miss Drew, I congratulate you. Mary tells me that she has given you that pretty little antique watch I have had my eye on. For weeks she has been refusing to sell it to me."

Mary spoke up. "I told Mr. Diamond the history of Valentine and his treasure," she said. "Ever since then he has been most eager to have Frances Humber's watch."

Mr. Diamond gave a deep chuckle. "I like to collect mementos of the romantic Old West."

"Do you live around here?" George asked.

"No, ma'am. I'm spending the summer in this area for my health. Staying at the Tumbleweed Hotel."

Mary smiled. "Mr. Diamond spends most of his days riding horseback in the mountains for exercise."

Nancy's thoughts went to the man in the black hat she had glimpsed in the ghost town—the one who perhaps had caused the rockslide. Had it been Mr. Diamond? Nancy thought it possible, because of his knowledge of the treasure.

After chatting for a few minutes, Mr. Diamond said, "Well, good-by now, girls," and left the shop.

While the others selected a few souvenirs, Nancy took Mary aside and asked her if she had heard from the artist, Mr. Bursey. When Mary said No, Nancy added, "If you do, please phone me right away." Mary promised that she would.

Dave pulled up in the wagon, so the girls hurriedly paid for their purchases and left.

"The horses are going to be delivered this afternoon," Uncle Ed said with satisfaction as they drove back to the ranch. "They're first-rate animals."

The ranch wagon arrived home just as Mrs. Thurmond was ringing the triangle for lunch. Nancy wondered how she would endure the long afternoon waiting for darkness so she could investigate the vat in the spring house. Her attention was distracted, however, by vans bringing the new horses. The girls and Aunt Bet went outside and watched the men run the palominos into the big meadow.

Nancy hurried to the fence for a closer look. "Oh, they're just beautiful!" she cried out.

Dave, who was on horseback beside the meadow gate, agreed. "They're just the way they should be—the color of a new minted gold coin."

The last one, a little mare, trotted into the enclosure. Dave wheeled beside her and herded the pony to the fence. "Want to pet her?" he asked Nancy.

With a smile Nancy stroked the sleek nose of the palomino. The mare nickered and shook her head.

Dave laughed. "Okay, little lady," he said, "on your way." He slapped the pony on the rump and she ran off to join the others. With a wave at Nancy, Dave rode off.

She admired the confident way he did his job and his kind, firm manner with the animals. "I do hope he's not mixed up in the mystery." She sighed.

As soon as it was dusk, Nancy hurried to the stable and saddled her mount in case the phantom horse should appear that night. Then she asked Bess and George to join her and investigate the spring house. Bess inquired if they were going to take Alice along.

"She's writing letters in her room," George said. Not knowing exactly what lay ahead of them, Nancy thought it wise to leave the younger girl behind.

When it was dark, she took her flashlight and the three girls hastened to the spring house. They went inside and closed the door. Nancy turned on her light, raised the vat lid, and with heart thumping, pulled up the false bottom. A deep hole slanted downward.

While George held the light, Nancy lowered herself into it and felt

her foot touch something solid. She kicked lightly and a wood panel moved. In a few moments she dropped onto an earthen floor. She was in the cellar! Through the hole came Bess. She landed with a thud.

From above came the noise of the vat lid closing. A moment later George appeared in the cellar, with her flashlight turned off.

For a moment they stood listening. A shiver ran up Nancy's spine. She thought she could hear someone breathing in the darkness.

Quietly Nancy took the flashlight from George and turned it on. The sweeping beam caught a crouching figure in the corner! Dave Gregory!

CHAPTER XI

A Rewarding Search

DAVE rose to his feet. “Well, Nancy, you caught me fair and square.”

She noted the spade at his feet. It looked as though her suspicions about Dave had been right. “Are you digging for treasure?” she asked coolly.

“Yes,” he said. “But I’m not pulling the phantom trick or causing the damage around here. Please believe me, Nancy. Let me tell you my story.”

George advised, “It had better be good.”

Dave said, “My brother and sister and I are the only remaining descendants of Frances Humber. I was born in Buffalo, New York, but our family moved to Phoenix when I was ten. We have Valentine’s original will, and had always known the story of his treasure, but never bothered to hunt for it.

“However, since my father’s death two years ago, things have been hard with us. I’ve been working my way through college, but will need more money to help educate my younger brother and sister. So I decided to take a summer job on Shadow Ranch and look for the treasure.”

“How amazing!” Bess murmured.

Dave reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a small piece of paper. In the beam of her flashlight Nancy saw that it was a faded photograph of a pretty woman. She also noticed that the corner was torn and the picture was just the right size to fit into the watch case!

“This is Frances Humber,” she announced.

The cowboy looked surprised. “How did you know?”

Instead of replying, Nancy asked him where he had obtained the picture. He explained that after Frances Humber Dale’s death, her friend in Tumbleweed, Miss Phillips, had removed the photograph from the watch and sent it to Frances’ children in the East. “It has

been handed down in our family since then."

Dave turned the picture over and on the back the girls saw the word *"cellar,"* written in old-fashioned script. He told them that the tradition in his family was that the cellar was the location of the treasure.

Nancy was excited at this new clue, but before telling him about the note in the watch, she asked him why he had not told Ed Rawley what he was doing.

"I was afraid he wouldn't hire me. He might have figured I'd spend all my time searching." The cowboy assured Nancy that he had done all his treasure hunting in off-duty hours.

"How did you know of the secret entrance?" Bess asked.

"Stories about that have always been known in my family," Dave answered. "Originally the trees grew thickly around the spring house, and in times of Indian attack, the occupants would escape by the secret exit into the woods and go to a hideout on the mountain slope."

Dave confessed that he was the prowler who had alarmed Mrs. Thurmond in the kitchen. He had hoped to search for the treasure in the cellar that night right after his turn on guard duty.

"But you raised such a rumpus," he said to Nancy with a grin, "that I knew it was no use to go on. I sneaked out through the spring house and came around to the kitchen a little behind the rest of the crowd."

"I believe you, Dave," said Nancy. "But you must promise to tell Mr. Rawley first thing in the morning what you have been doing."

The cowboy assured her that he would. "I'm sorry I was kind of rude to you girls. I just didn't want you hanging around and getting in the way of my treasure hunt."

"You were pretty awful," said George. "But maybe we'll forgive you."

"Of course we will," Bess agreed.

Nancy smiled at Dave and he chuckled. "All along I couldn't help liking you," he said.

Nancy reached into her pocket and brought out the antique watch. She showed him how the secret lid opened. The picture of Frances fit perfectly to the torn fragment on the empty side.

"You're amazing!" he said. "What a detective!"

Next, Nancy removed the picture of Valentine and turned it over, so that Dave could see what was written on the back.

"With the word on your picture, we now have a complete message!" Nancy said excitedly.

" '*Green bottle in cellar,*' " Dave read. "Surely the treasure would be too large for a bottle. But perhaps it's a clue to the real thing."

"That's what Nancy figured," George said, grinning. "Let's start digging!"

For half an hour Dave dug and the girls probed the loose dirt for a bottle.

Suddenly Bess cried out. "I've found it!"

Nancy hurried to her side and pressed in the earth where Bess showed her. Her fingers touched the neck of a bottle with a cap on it.

Dave came over and spaded carefully around the glass. When it was partly free, Nancy said, "Wait!" She brushed the dirt from the large bottle and shone her light on it. Bess exclaimed in disappointment. The bottle was black.

"No use bothering with that," Nancy said. "We're looking for a green one. This has been lying here for years and gradually became covered with dirt."

With grim determination the treasure hunters continued to dig and sift the earth. When they had worked over the whole cellar floor, the four stopped, exhausted, and sat down.

Bess expressed the thought that was in all of their minds. "Maybe someone has found it already."

"Shorty, perhaps," Dave said. "I've caught him snooping." He told the girls that he suspected the other cowboy of knowing about the secret entrance and of inflicting damage on the ranch. "I'm sure he's not working alone, either, but who else is in league with him I don't know."

Nancy pointed out that if Shorty and his accomplices had found the treasure, they would have left the ranch by this time.

The young detective said, "There's another person who might have found the bottle—Frances Humber herself. What do you know of her story, Dave?"

"Only that Dirk Valentine and Frances had met only once on Shadow Ranch. He sent her a message that he was coming and Frances slipped out of the house through the secret entrance and met him in the spring house. But the law was after Valentine as usual and he had to leave the territory. He wrote to Frances, however, during the summer of 1880, but her father intercepted the letter and sent

Frances to friends in Montana.

"Then Valentine probably hid the bottle in the cellar while Frances was away, and sent her the watch with the location of the bottle written on the backs of the pictures."

"That's right," Bess declared. "The date on the watch is June, 1880."

Dave went on to say that Frances must have written to Valentine and told him on what day she would return, for that night the outlaw sneaked onto the ranch to see her.

"But the sheriff and the posse suspected that he would come. They were lying in wait and shot Valentine as he entered the spring house. A few minutes later the sheriff went to the living room to tell his daughter. He found her lighting a lamp. When he told her that her sweetheart had been killed, she fainted."

"Oh, not" cried Bess.

"For many weeks she was ill," Dave continued. "During this time her father found the watch sent to her by Valentine and took it. When she was well enough to travel, he sent her to stay with relatives in Buffalo. There she married, had two children, and died while still a young woman," he concluded.

George sighed. "Poor thing! She never had a chance to come back here and hunt for her treasure."

Suddenly Dave stood up. "I must go now," he said. "I have to stand watch soon in the east meadow."

Quietly the foursome left the cellar by the secret entrance and parted outside the spring house. The girls went to shower and change their clothes.

As Nancy dressed, she mulled over the story Dave had told her. She tried to reconstruct the scene at the ranch house on the night of the outlaw's death.

"If Frances had returned home only that afternoon," Nancy reasoned, "she may not have had a chance to look in the cellar for the bottle until that night. No doubt she also knew or guessed that her sweetheart would come to see her at the place they had met before. When the shots were fired, Frances would surely have heard them."

Here Nancy came to the part of the story that puzzled her. Maybe Frances Humber was in the cellar and ran upstairs to light a lamp? But why? It would have been more natural for her to go outside to be with Valentine. But suppose Frances had already found the bottle? At the sound of the shot she dashed upstairs in a panic, then found that she

still had the bottle in her hand.

"Of course! She hid it in the lamp!" Nancy said aloud. "Then when her father walked in, Frances lit the lamp to cover her action."

At the bewildered looks on the faces of Bess and George, Nancy chuckled. Quickly she told them her new theory. "We must ask Aunt Bet if any of the old Humber lamps are still on the premises."

The girls hurried to the living room and found Mrs. Rawley seated in a rocker, mending her husband's socks. In response to Nancy's question, she told her that there was a lot of junk from former owners in a storeroom next to Alice's bedroom.

The girls hurried down the hall and entered the storeroom. Bess switched on the ceiling light. Amidst old trunks, baskets, and barrels they found a birdcage and a hatstand but no lamp. On the seat of a broken chair lay a ragged quilt with something wrapped in it. Nancy carefully unfolded the bedcover. Revealed was a large oil lamp with a deep ruby glass well.

Bess gave a gasp of excitement, and George said, "If only it's the right one!"

With anxious fingers Nancy removed the chimney and the wick. She reached into the well and pulled out a slender green glass bottle!

CHAPTER XII

Lights Out!

"WHAT wonderful luck!" Nancy exclaimed softly. "To think of finding this bottle after all these years!"

"Let's see what's inside it," Bess urged.

Nancy put her little finger into the bottle and slid out a curled-up paper. Carefully she unrolled it, then glanced at the signature at the bottom—a bold "V" and a heart.

"It's a letter from Valentine to Frances," Nancy said.

The girls crowded dose and peered at the faded handwriting. The long-dead romance came alive for them as Nancy read aloud:

" 'My dear girl, I am writing this in haste to tell you that I truly love you. Would that we could marry! But the law pursues me and I doubt that I will live much longer. Too late I am sorry for my misspent life.' ".

"How sad!" murmured Bess.

" 'I want you to have my fortune,' " the note continued, " 'but many people are seeking it. I know my mail is seized. I have hidden instructions in this bottle. A little of my booty has been converted to gold and melted down into special pieces, dear Frances, made just for you.' "

"I wonder what he meant," said George.

As Nancy was about to read on, the ceiling light went out. George gave an exclamation of annoyance. "What a time for the bulb to got Wait here. I'll get one from the kitchen."

As George felt her way out of the room, a suspicion flashed across Nancy's mind. Slipping the letter into her shirt pocket, she said, "Come on, Bess!" and went down the hall with her friend at her heels asking what was the matter.

In the living room Nancy saw the shadowy figure of Aunt Bet

standing by a table lamp. “The lights don’t work,” she said.

At the same moment Alice’s voice came up the hall. “Did someone blow a fuse?”

Her fears growing, Nancy groped her way to the telephone and picked it up. The line was dead! She ran her hand down the wire. *It had been cut!*

Nancy returned to the living room as George hastened in from the kitchen.

“No lights there, either,” she reported.

“And probably no water,” Nancy added grimly.

“The pump runs by electricity.” She went on to say someone had probably damaged the generator or cut all the wires.

There was a moment of shocked silence.

“But why?” Alice asked in a frightened voice.

“I’m afraid our enemies are about to make more trouble. They figure we’re helpless without lights or a phone.”

“What do you think they’ll do?” Aunt Bet asked anxiously.

Nancy said she could not be sure, of course, but she expressed fears about the new palominos.

“We must report this to the men on patrol,” said Mrs. Rawley. “They may not yet know anything about the power failure.”

Nancy agreed. “But we must be very quiet about it. If the gang doesn’t suspect we’ve guessed their plan, we may be able to catch them in the act.”

Nancy suggested that Aunt Bet and Alice keep watch in the house while she and the cousins looked for the guards.

The three hastened to their room to get their flashlights. “Don’t turn them on,” Nancy warned, “unless you absolutely have to.”

The girls walked out and paused at the edge of the portico. Somewhere in the darkness men were ready to work more mischief.

“You two go to the east meadow and report to Dave,” she said. “I’ll locate the palomino guard.”

“Be careful,” Bess warned. “You may find the troublemakers instead. They struck at the pump house before. Remember? That’s close to the big meadow.”

“That’s why I think they won’t do it again,” Nancy replied.

“Probably they’ll pick on a different place. Good luck! If you run into trouble, yell!”

George and Bess melted into the darkness and Nancy hurried in the opposite direction. As she gazed over the fence of the big meadow, she could see most of the palominos standing quietly together near the far end. One or two were browsing in the middle, but there was no sign of a mounted guard.

Quickly Nancy circled the stable and the adjoining tack room, but found no one. Puzzled, she looked across the yard to the corral. It was empty. Where was the guard?

“I must find someone,” Nancy thought, but before she could move, there came a loud whinnying from the stable.

Nancy wheeled and hurried to the door, then paused, well aware that it might be dangerous to go inside. She opened the door quietly and stood listening. Except for the nickering of a restless animal, all was quiet.

Nancy stepped in and walked cautiously between the two rows of stalls. When she reached the one where her horse stood, it occurred to her that someone might have unsaddled him to prevent her from being first to go after the phantom. But she found the saddle still in place.

As Nancy walked quietly along the left side of the horse, he whinnied nervously. She murmured reassuringly to him and stroked his head. Then she felt the girth to be sure it had not been loosened and ran her hands over the bridle. All was in order.

She was about to leave the stall when there came a loud whinny from the other end of the stable and the sound of a hoof hitting a bucket.

Nancy froze. She heard a footstep!

Suppose it was one of the gang? “If he finds me,” she thought, “I’ll be trapped in this stall-unable to sound the alarm.”

Nancy knew she must try to get out of the stable. The footstep had seemed to be near the excited horse. But exactly where was the intruder now? Nancy slipped out of the stall, and hugging the wall, moved toward the door.

The next moment she was seized from behind and a hard hand stifled her outcry. As Nancy struggled, there came a sharp exclamation and she was suddenly released.

“Nancy!” said a familiar voice. It was Tex’s! “Great jumpin’ steers!

I'm sorry! Are you all right?" the cowboy asked anxiously. "Shucks, girl, I thought you were one of the phantom gang!"

Nancy took a deep breath. "I thought you were, too," she said, and quickly told him her news.

The cowboy gave a low whistle. "Trouble's comin', that's for sure!"

"Where are all the guards?" asked Nancy.

"Mr. Rawley and Walt Sanders have gone down the valley toward Tumbleweed to watch the road. Mr. Rawley figured if outsiders are helpin' to do the damage they might come part way by car, park it, and sneak into the ranch on foot.

"If that's how it's done, maybe he and Sanders can nab 'em. Shorty took early watch, so he's probably sacked out in the bunkhouse.

"I'm set to guard the stable area," Tex went on, "but I figured I'd sure be less conspicuous on foot. A while ago I heard a noise from here and came in to check. It was nothin'—just Daisy thumpin' around. She's restless tonight."

"Who's watching the palominos?" Nancy asked.

"Bud."

"He wasn't a few minutes ago."

"Oh—oh!" said Tex. "Something's wrong there! He'd never leave his post. Come on!"

The two hastened outside. As they turned toward the meadow, from the far end, came a high weird whistle.

The signal for the phantom horse!

Tex stopped short, then raced toward the house, shouting the alarm. Moments later, the clanging of the iron triangle outside the kitchen filled the night.

Nancy, meanwhile, had sprinted into the stable and led out her horse. As she sprang into the saddle, she could see the mysterious glowing steed galloping from the trees into the meadow. It hardly seemed to touch the ground and it wavered in the wind.

"I'm going to catch it!" Nancy vowed, and spurred her horse to racing speed.

Straight ahead lay the meadow gate, but it was closed. Taking a deep breath, Nancy gathered her mount and cleared it.

As before, the phantom was heading straight across the meadow. Nancy rode hard to cut the animal off. She intended to seize the

phantom's bridle should it have one on.

In a moment the apparition turned and raced down the meadow, straight toward the palominos. Shrilly whinnying, it plunged into their midst. Some palominos shied and reared, others ran wild.

Nancy's horse, trying to overtake the fleeing phantom, pounded through the scattered group. Suddenly one of the frightened palominos thundered across her path. Frantically Nancy tried to pull her own mount aside.

Too late! The two horses collided. Nancy flew from the saddle and hit the ground so hard she blacked out!

CHAPTER XIII

Missing Artist

WHEN Nancy regained consciousness, Dave was bending over her. "Are you okay?" he asked anxiously, helping her to sit up. "Any bones broken?"

"No," said Nancy. "I guess I'm just bruised. Have I been lying here long?"

"Only a few minutes," Dave replied. "I saw you smack into that palomino and go sailing off. You really reached for the moon!"

Dave lifted Nancy to her feet and steadied her for a moment. As she thanked him, she could hear horses whinnying and men shouting.

"That phantom sure spooked the palominos," Dave said. "Did you get a good look at it?"

Nancy shook her head regretfully. "I didn't get close enough to see how it was rigged."

A horseman reined up beside them. It was Walt Sanders. "Fences have been cut!" the ranch foreman barked. "We've got to round up those palominos. Could take all night or longer if they run into the hills."

He spurred off and Dave turned to Nancy. "Can you make it to the house by yourself?"

"Don't worry about me," she assured him. "I'm fine."

Dave looked around in the darkness, but there was no sign of Nancy's horse. "I reckon he bolted," he said.

His own mount, a seasoned work animal, stood nearby, unaffected by the panic in the meadow. Dave stepped into his saddle. "Keep clear of those running horses," he warned, then rode off after the foreman.

By the time Nancy had walked the length of the meadow to the ranch house, she no longer felt shaken from her fall. In the living room were the other three girls and Aunt Bet. On the table, lighted,

was the oil lamp which had belonged to the Humbers. As Nancy walked in, Bess cried, “Did you catch the phantom?”

“Sorry. No.”

“Was there any damage this time?” Mrs. Rawley asked.

Nancy reported the bad news about the cut fences and the palominos.

Aunt Bet’s voice was strained as she said, “If we lose those horses, it will be a crushing blow for us. I appreciate all you’ve done, Nancy. Bess and George told me how you found the letter.”

“It was so clever of you to deduce what Frances Humber did,” Alice said admiringly.

“But you didn’t finish reading it,” George reminded Nancy.

Nancy took the letter from her pocket, smoothed out the paper, and held it dose to the oil lamp.

George said, “You left off where he said he had melted down some gold into special pieces.”

“Yes, here’s the place,” said Nancy. She read the next sentence. “ ‘My treasure is hidden in the oldest dwelling on the ranch.’ ”

“That’s this house,” Aunt Bet exclaimed. “We were told that Sheriff Humber built it first.”

“Read on,” Bess urged. “Exactly where is the treasure?”

Nancy shook her head. “He doesn’t say. Listen! ‘I fear that I am followed and even this note may fall into my enemies’ hands. Therefore, I will say only that you know the place I mean.’ ”

George groaned. “We’ll have to search the whole house. We’d better get started.”

“There’s likely to be a space under a loose floorboard,” said Nancy, “or a niche in a chimney flue, or perhaps a false wall in a closet.”

She suggested that each of them take a section of the house to investigate.

Nancy herself went to the big fireplace in the living room. She thought that one of the stones in it might conceal a hiding place.

With the aid of her flashlight the young sleuth tried to peer between the rocks, but they were set close together and no space was visible. She pushed hard on each one, but none budged.

When she finished, Nancy turned her attention to the Indian grindstone. Because it was set in the middle, she thought there might

be something special about it and tried hard to move the stone, but it was as tightly in place as all the others.

By the time Nancy had finished checking the living room, the rest of the searchers had straggled back. They reported no success.

Baffled, Nancy suggested that they go to bed. She felt sore and weary. “Maybe I’ll be able to think more clearly after I get some sleep.” She gave Valentine’s letter to Aunt Bet for safekeeping.

At breakfast Uncle Ed was gray-faced and grim. None of the men had been to bed the night before.

“Six palominos are missing and two are wire-cut,” the rancher reported.

Tex snorted, “The meadow fence was wrecked! Some no-good varmint cut it in at least thirty places. We’ve been workin’ on repairs all night. Dave is still out there finishin’.”

Uncle Ed announced that he was driving into Tumbleweed to inform the sheriff of what had happened. “Maybe he can spare me a man or I could get some volunteers to help me round up the horses. We’ll have to go up in the mountain and look for them. I’ll also have the telephone company send a man to fix the wire.”

“What about water?” Mrs. Thurmond asked.

The rancher replied that the pump and the lights, too, would be working in a couple of hours. “The generator was damaged,” he said, “but not seriously.”

“The big mischief was the attack on the horses,” Nancy remarked. “Whoever planned that wanted to be sure things would be dark and confused and you could not get help in a hurry.”

The rancher quickly finished eating and was rising to go when Dave came in. The cowboy asked if he could see the Rawleys alone for a few minutes, and added, “You come, too, Nancy.”

Uncle Ed led the way into the living room and closed the door. “Now what is it?” he asked.

Swiftly Dave told the couple about his search for the bandit’s fortune. “If I do find the treasure,” he added earnestly, “I certainly intend to turn over a share to you both.”

Mr. Rawley smiled. “Thank you, Dave. But we wouldn’t hear of it. I wish you luck.”

Aunt Bet now told the men about Nancy’s discovery of Valentine’s letter.

Nancy pointed out that surely the treasure was linked to the trouble on the ranch. “Until it’s found, I’m afraid the phantom horse will continue to appear.”

Uncle Ed agreed. “You’re a remarkable sleuth, young lady. Keep up the good work!”

Dave said that with Nancy on the case he thought they had a good chance to find the treasure. “But I won’t be able to do much today. We have those palominos to look for.”

Nancy admitted that she did not know exactly where to search next for the hidden treasure.

Aunt Bet patted her shoulder. “You need a holiday from all this trouble. Why don’t you girls drive into Phoenix for some fun?”

“That’s a wonderful idea!” Nancy said.

As she had thought, her friends were delighted at the prospect. Nancy hurried to get the ranch wagon. When she pulled up in front of the patio, George was waiting with two Thermos bottles and a jug of water.

As she put them into the back of the ranch wagon, Dave came hurrying past. He grinned. “I’m glad to see that you tenderfoot gals have turned into water-conscious Westerners.”

Alice and Bess were approaching the car and heard him. When he was out of earshot, Alice said, “As for you, Nancy, he’s really flipped!”

“And what’ll poor Ned do?” George teased.

Nancy grinned. “We’ll be home by the time he gets back from Europe.”

“Just wait until the square dance tomorrow night,” said Bess. “I’ll bet Dave’s a marvelous dancer.”

“I wish,” said Alice, “that there was somebody to take me.”

There was a gleam in Bess’s eye as she said, “Don’t give up hope, Alice. You might meet somebody at the rodeo or barbecue.”

George looked at her cousin quizzically and Nancy smiled. Both knew Bess loved playing the role of matchmaker!

“What have you got up your sleeve?” George demanded.

“Just my arm,” replied Bess, but she grinned.

Nancy spoke up. “Let’s do some shopping in Phoenix. I’d like to find something special to wear tomorrow.”

“I know,” exclaimed Bess. “Let’s all buy Indian costumes!”

When they reached the city, George directed Nancy to a shop which sold a variety of Indian apparel and souvenirs. The sight of the colorful squaw dresses drove all thoughts of the ranch trouble from the girls' minds. Happily they tried them on and helped one another make selections. Alice was delighted and pirouetted in front of the long mirror to watch the wide skirts swing out.

Finally Nancy chose a turquoise-blue model with silver rickrack trimming. George's choice was a bold red which set off her short dark hair, and Bess selected one with a yellow skirt and black bodice. Alice picked out a pumpkin-colored costume trimmed in black.

With their purchases in boxes the girls strolled down the street to a Spanish restaurant. Here they ate a delicious lunch of *tacos* and spicy chili. For dessert they had iced fresh fruit.

Bess sighed. "Umm, that was super."

Afterward, they walked to a wide street beside a park where an outdoor painting exhibition was being held. The group stopped now and then to admire and compliment the artists who sat beside their work.

As the other girls lingered over a painting, Nancy wandered ahead, then stopped before a lone picture. After a casual glance she suddenly realized that it was a pastel drawing of the old hotel in the ghost town on Shadow Mountain. Quickly she called her friends.

"That's the same hotel, all right," George declared. "The one where we hitched our horses and found that crushed crayon."

Alice was pale. "My father did that pastell I know it!"

The artist's chair beside the picture was vacant.

"I must find him!" Alice cried out.

CHAPTER XIV

The Nettle Trick

NEAR the empty artist's chair a man sat sketching. Nancy walked toward him. "Pardon me, but do you know where the person is who drew that pastel?"

The man looked up from his work and pointed with his pencil. "There's the one."

Nancy turned and saw a stout woman in a blue dress coming toward them. "Want to buy that pastel girls? It's the last one. The rest sold like hot cakes."

Alice's face showed keen disappointment. "This isn't your work."

The woman chuckled and sat down heavily. "That's right, dearie. I can't even draw a cow. I'm a dealer. I buy from the artists and sell their work."

"Where is the man who did this picture?" Nancy pressed.

"That I don't know. He told me he was a stranger—just visiting Phoenix. Seemed kind of close-mouthed—didn' t say where he came from and where he was staying."

Alice asked, "Was he a slender gray-haired man?"

"Yes. Said his name was Bursey. Do you know him?"

"We think so," Nancy replied.

Alice looked longingly at the picture. "How much is it?" she asked the woman. When Alice heard the price, her face clouded. "I haven't enough money to buy it."

Exchanging quick glances, the other girls reached an agreement. "That's all right, Alice," said Nancy. "We'll make up the difference."

When the picture was paid for, Alice took it gratefully. She thanked the girls as they walked away from the dealer, then added, "Oh, Nancy, you've been so wonderful to me!"

Alice's eyes were misty with emotion. "I feel that we must be getting closer to my father." She thought that he might have returned to the mountain cabin and begged Nancy to go back there with her.

"I wish I could," said Nancy, "but it would be too late to make the trip today after we reach the ranch. Tell you what, though. I'll take you in the morning."

George had another idea. "There's just a chance our Uncle Ross Regor might be around this exhibition someplace. He might have come to see how his pictures are selling."

The others agreed that George had a point. And for a while the four girls strolled through the park, keeping their eyes open for the slender gray-haired man. They did not see him.

Near midafternoon Nancy treated everyone to cool sodas from a passing vendor and they sat on a bench to drink them. Bess glanced at her watch and suggested they start for home. George drove.

They crossed the desert without trouble and arrived at the ranch in time for supper. At the table they learned that the telephone, lights, and water had been restored, but four of the palominos were still missing.

"The critters are up on Shadow Mountain somewhere," Bud remarked gloomily as he passed the biscuits to Nancy. "We have our work cut out to track 'em."

"And we might as well face it," said Uncle Ed, "they might be badly hurt."

To lighten the conversation, Aunt Bet reminded everyone of the barbecue next day. "It's customary for us ranch folks to take a dessert. Any suggestions?"

Tex grinned. "I sure do cotton to chocolate cake."

"Nancy makes scrumptious ones," said Bess.

"Then I guess she's elected," Mrs. Rawley said with a smile.

Nancy laughed. "Thank you for the job, my friends! Now, who's going to help?"

"I will!" chorused Dave, Tex, and Bud.

"Good," said Nancy. "You boys can shell the walnuts for topping the icing—that is, if you have any, Mrs. Thurmond."

"We have plenty of everything," the cook declared. "Just step right up and take hold!"

"We'll all help," Bess said happily. "Let's make it an extra big cake."

After supper the girls dried the dishes for Mrs. Thurmond. Then Nancy put all the cake ingredients on the big kitchen table. The cook gave her several large bowls.

Tex grinned as he picked up a nutcracker. “Boys, we hired out to punch cows and here we are peelin’ nuts!”

While Nancy and her assistants worked, they talked about the phantom. Mrs. Thurmond listened intently.

“Where do you think the ghost horse is kept?” Alice asked.

“Folks say Valentine had a hideout on Shadow Mountain,” Mrs. Thurmond spoke up, “and I figure that’s where the critter stays now—same as it did in life.”

The girls tried to convince the cook that the apparition was a mere trick, but they could not do it.

Nancy changed the subject. “If Valentine did have a hideout in this area, very likely he kept his horse in a corral there. It’s possible that the persons who are attacking the ranch have discovered the place and are using it for their trick horse.”

Mrs. Thurmond shook her head gloomily. “If it was real folks doin’ the damage, I’d face right up to ‘em,” she declared. “But I’ve seen that spook with my own eyes. I tell you it’s too much for my nerves!”

By the time the baking was finished, Mrs. Thurmond had excused herself and gone to bed.

“Now for the icing,” said Nancy.

When the cake was cool enough, she covered it with thick creamy swirls of dark chocolate and studded the top with whole walnuts.

Bess sighed. “It’s too bad we can’t have just a teeny piece now, isn’t it?”

“I sure could go for a slab,” Tex agreed hungrily.

“Come on, cookie,” Dave coaxed Nancy.

“Think how good that would taste to us poor riders out on the midnight watch,” Bud said in his soft drawl. “Saddlesore, weary—”

“You’re breaking our hearts,” George said cheerfully.

“Graham crackers and milk tonight,” Nancy announced with a chuckle. “You’ll get your cake tomorrow.”

In the morning Alice could hardly contain her excitement over the trip to the cabin. Not wanting their destination known, Nancy had warned Alice to say nothing of her hopes at the breakfast table. When

Aunt Bet asked the girls about their plans, Nancy said, “Alice and I would like to go for a ride in the mountains.”

George had letters to write and Bess said she wanted to wash and set her hair.

“I’ll saddle up for you,” Shorty volunteered. Nancy was surprised at his friendly gesture. She and Alice thanked him, then hurried to change into riding clothes.

When they were dressed and waiting on the portico, Tex walked up, leading Nancy’s bay. Just behind him came Shorty with a sorrel for Alice. Nancy stepped into the yard and mounted easily. With a shrill whinny, the horse reared.

“Hang on!” Tex shouted.

Nancy gripped the pommel tight and hung onto the reins. The horse pitched high and landed stiff-legged on all fours!

Tex seized the bridle and held the bay down, giving Nancy time to fling herself from the saddle.

“Hey, boy! Easy now!” Tex said as he tried to calm the excited animal.

“Nancy, are you hurt?” Alice asked worriedly.

“I’m all right,” Nancy replied breathlessly. “But what’s the matter with the horse?”

Shorty had hurried to Tex’s assistance, and now the snorting steed was standing still. The red-haired cowboy’s eyes narrowed with suspicion as he loosened the saddle girth and reached up under the blanket.

“I thought so!” He brought out his hand and held it open for the others to see. In his palm lay a nettle.

Shorty’s eyes grew wide. “Well, what do you know about that!” he drawled.

Tex looked at him levelly. “What do you know about this?”

“Me!” exclaimed Shorty. “Some mean coyote pulled that trick, not me!”

“You saddled the animals,” Tex retorted and turned to Nancy. “I was passin’ the stable when Shorty came out with these mounts. He asked me to bring this one over to you.”

“Now hold on thar a minute,” Shorty put in. “When I went to the stable after breakfast I found this bay already saddled. I throwed the saddle on the other one and brung ’em out. That’s all I know about it.

You got no call to accuse me. No sir! Not me!"

Tex's face flushed with anger. "If you're tellin' the truth, Shorty Steele, I apologize."

Before the stocky cowboy could answer, Nancy suggested that Tex check Alice's saddle blanket. He did and reported that it was all right. The girls mounted and rode toward the meadow.

“Hang on, Nancy!” Tex shouted

“I don’t believe Shorty was telling the truth,” said Alice.

Nancy said nothing, but she was inclined to agree. Aloud she said, “Someone has not given up trying to get me out of the picture.”

When they finally sighted the cabin, Nancy reined up behind the clump of big boulders. She swung from the saddle and ground-hitched her horse, but was not so quick as Alice. The younger girl dashed to the cabin and knocked on the door. As Nancy ran up, it was opened by a slender gray-haired man.

With a shock Nancy recognized him. He was the one who had put the snake’s rattle into her knitting bag and dropped the warning note into the car!

CHAPTER XV

A Perilous Ride

ALICE was on the verge of tears. The man in the cabin doorway was not her father!

He scowled at the two girls. “What do you want?”

Nancy was sure the man must have recognized her, but he gave no sign of it, so she pretended not to know him. Quickly she thought of an excuse for coming. “Are you Mr. Bursey?” she asked.

“Yes. Why?”

“We’d like to buy one of your pastels,” Nancy replied.

“My what?”

“Pastels—your pictures,” Nancy said.

“Oh.” The man paused. “I haven’t any more. How did you know I was here?”

Nancy explained casually that Mary Deer had told them the artist lived on the mountain. “Several days ago we happened to see this cabin and we thought perhaps it might be where you live.”

He gave Nancy a long, hard look. “My paintings are all gone,” he said. “No use coming back.”

Nancy apologized for bothering him, and as the girls turned to walk back to their horses, he closed the door.

Alice was deeply upset. “I just can’t believe that man drew those pictures.”

“I’m sure he didn’t,” Nancy replied as the girls mounted. “He’s no artist. He didn’t know what I meant by pastels and he called the pictures paintings. He should have known they’re drawings made with special crayons.”

She told Alice how she, Bess, and George had encountered the man before.

Alice was excited. “Maybe he’s holding my father prisoner somewhere!”

Nancy agreed that was possible. But where? she wondered. There had been no one else in the one-room cabin. Recalling how Chief had appeared mysteriously from behind it, Nancy surmised there was a hiding place nearby.

“What shall we do, Nancy?” Alice asked.

“Report to the sheriff as fast as we can.”

Nancy added that if Alice’s father was a prisoner of Bursey, the gray-haired man and his pals might very well be the Chicago bank robbers. “And since Bursey is also mixed up with the ranch trouble, his gang is probably responsible for the phantom horse.”

As the girls rode down the trail, Nancy’s thoughts dwelt uneasily on the man who said his name was Bursey. Could he possibly believe that she had not known him? “I’m afraid my trumped-up story didn’t fool him,” she decided. “He must know I’ll report him to Sheriff Curtis. But why didn’t he try to stop me?”

The answer was plain. The man believed that people knew the girls’ destination. “He doesn’t want us to disappear at his cabin,” Nancy told herself, “so he’ll arrange an ’accident’ for us on the way down the mountain.”

She turned in her saddle and warned Alice to keep alert for signs of pursuit. A little farther along they came to a fork in the trail.

“Let’s follow this other path,” Nancy suggested.

They soon found the new route a hazardous one, however, and were forced to slow down. The horses were picking their footing on the narrow trail which wound back and forth across a sheer cliff.

Alice glanced up. “Uncle Ed says that Westerners call this kind of path an ‘eyebrow trail.’ I can see why.”

A few minutes later the girls rode under a rock overhang, which prevented them from seeing the turn of the path above them. Suddenly pebbles and dust started falling from above. Someone was following them!

Nancy signaled to Alice, who nodded her understanding. The riders sat in tense silence as their horses slowly proceeded to the bottom of the cliff, where the trail became less steep. But it was narrow and precarious. The girls urged their horses to go as fast as they dared. Soon they heard the clatter of a horse’s hooves behind them.

Nancy knew they had no defense against the surprise attack she

feared was coming. It would take only a few boulders rolling from above to spook the horses and cause the "accident."

Nancy looked ahead for shelter. Some distance below, the trail disappeared among high rocks. "If we can reach that spot before our enemy strikes," she thought, "we may have a chance!"

Again the girls urged their mounts on and rode desperately toward the screen of rocks. Jolting hard, Alice clung to the saddle horn all the way.

"We made it!" she gasped as they rounded a curve and were hidden between huge boulders which lay on either side.

Swiftly Nancy dismounted, signaling her companion to do the same. The younger girl followed as Nancy led her horse into a cluster of the giant rocks. Alice held her mount firmly and kept one hand soothingly upon his nose. If only the animals would stand quietly! One jangle of the bridle, or a hoof scuffing a stone, and their hiding place would be revealed!

Hardly breathing, the girls heard the clatter of stones as their pursuer approached. The sounds came closer, then suddenly stopped.

"He sees we're not on the trail ahead," Nancy thought. Would the rider figure that they had rounded the next curve but were hiding? For a long moment there was silence from the other side of the boulders.

"He's listening!" Nancy thought.

The girls stood frozen. Then came the creak of a saddle and the sound of hooves as the rider moved on.

Nancy and Alice gave sighs of relief, and after waiting a few minutes, led their horses out of the boulders. Quickly the two remounted.

Alice said fearfully, "When he reaches open mountainside again, he'll see that he has missed us and come back. We'll meet him head-on!"

"I know," Nancy replied. "We must look for another branching trail."

Presently she spotted a side path among the boulders and the girls guided their horses onto it. The way downward was narrow and rough, but the two riders were sheltered first by rocks, then tall fir and tamarack trees. They reached the valley a mile from where the other trail came down.

"We made it safely!" Alice cried in relief. "Oh, Nancy, how can I

ever thank you?"

Her companion smiled. "Don't think I wasn't scared myself!"

It was noon when the girls dismounted at the stable. They hurried to the living room where they found the Rawleys chatting with Bess and George.

While Alice excitedly reported all that had happened to them, Nancy telephoned the sheriff. She told him her suspicions of the man calling himself Bursey, and also the possibility that Ross Regor, Alice's father, was being held prisoner on the mountain by the same gang responsible for the phantom-horse trick.

Sheriff Curtis said, "I'll go up to the cabin at once with two men and arrest this hombre Bursey and his confederates."

Nancy hastened back to the living room and reported the conversation.

"That's great!" exclaimed George. "If the sheriff catches the bank robbers, it will mean the end of the damage on the ranch."

"But they must have another hideout, where they keep Uncle Ross," Bess objected, "and we don't know where that is. Besides, the sheriff may find only Bursey."

"But if he talks, we'll get to the bottom of the mystery," Nancy reminded her.

Suddenly the door to the portico burst open and Dave came in. "Mr. Rawley, we found the missing horses!"

Amid the girls' exclamation of joy, the rancher beamed and asked. "Where are they?"

"Tex, Bud, and I put them in the meadow. We found them up on Shadow Mountain, grazing by a creek." Dave hesitated. "The only thing is, they're hurt."

Mr. Rawley's jaw tightened. "Bad?"

"Three of 'em are wire-cut and the mare is limping. We'd better call the vet."

The rancher agreed and Dave hurried to the telephone. "Could be worse," Uncle Ed said. "Maybe everything will be all right—provided there's no more damage."

Aunt Bet smiled cheerfully. "Nothing more is likely to happen. After all, the sheriff is on his way to round up the gang—thanks to Nancy."

In a happy frame of mind, the girls hurried away to dress in their squaw outfits before lunch. While she showered, Nancy's thoughts

were on the treasure. Where could the outlaw have hidden it? Still puzzling, Nancy slipped into her blue costume. She brushed her titian hair until it gleamed, then put on a pair of small silver earrings and added a touch of lipstick.

The other girls were not ready yet, so Nancy went into the living room to wait for them. As she seated herself in one of the rockers, her glance fell on the fireplace. Once again, the Indian grinding stone caught her attention. She recalled what Aunt Bet had told her about it and about the other stones. Suddenly her eyes lit up with an idea and she jumped forward in excitement.

"Bess! George! Alice!" she called, running to the door.

"What is it?" asked George as the three girls came hurrying down the hall.

Nancy's eyes sparkled with excitement. "I think I know where the treasure is!"

CHAPTER XVI

The Sheriff's Quarry

A burst of excited questions met Nancy's announcement. She chuckled and George said, "Quiet, everybody. Now tell us where the treasure is."

Nancy led her friends into the living room, shut the door, and announced, "In the cliff houses down the valley."

"They're certainly the oldest dwellings around here," said George. "But they are not on the ranch."

"They were when Valentine wrote his letter."

"Nancy, how do you know?" Alice asked.

"Because Aunt Bet told us that every stone in this fireplace came from somewhere on the ranch. It stands to reason that the Indian grinding stone came from the cliff dwelling." She reminded the girls that Sheriff Humber had been obliged to sell that part of his property after Valentine's death. "It's natural that he would get rid of the outlying section first."

"Nancy," declared George, "that's a great piece of deduction."

Just then the triangle clanged for luncheon. As the girls hurried to the kitchen, Nancy requested them to keep her theory a secret.

"We won't be able to check it before tomorrow, and we don't want anybody else to get there before us."

As the group hurried into the kitchen, they stared in amazement. Mrs. Thurmond, ladeling out stew at the stove, was wearing her big white apron as usual, and on her head was perched a black straw hat bedecked with artificial roses. Instead of being amused, the cowboys stood about looking uncomfortable and Aunt Bet's face was strained.

"I'm leavin'!" announced the cook, without turning from her work. "I've fixed my last dinner in this place. As soon as it's over, I'm ridin' into Tumbleweed with you young folks and takin' the three-o'clock bus for Phoenix."

Mr. Rawley said soothingly, “Things have been pretty rough around here, Mrs. Thurmond. But we think they’ll be getting better pretty soon.”

Mrs. Thurmond faced the rancher squarely. “Mr. Rawley, I can take rough times with the best of ’em, but phantom horses—that’s too much for me.” She picked up the big bowl of stew and walked toward the table.

Aunt Bet followed her, pleading. “Mrs. Thurmond, please reconsider.”

“Nope!” said the woman, and set the bowl down with a thump.

Nancy knew that the loss of the cook would be an added hardship for Aunt Bet, who not only had ranch-house duties, but was needed to help her husband.

This new crisis threw a pall over the meal. At the appearance of a magnificent lemon meringue pie, the gloom became even deeper, for it seemed likely to be the last time any of the diners would taste Mrs. Thurmond’s fine baking.

When the dessert was gone, the men pushed back their chairs and rose. Immediately the cook asked Dave what time he would be driving the ranch wagon to Tumbleweed.

Before he could answer, Nancy spoke up. “Not for half an hour yet, are you, Dave?”

He caught the urgent message in her eyes and nodded. “I’ll honk the horn when I’m ready to go,” he promised.

As soon as the men had left the kitchen, the girls and Aunt Bet gathered around Mrs. Thurmond and pleaded with her to remain. The little woman shook her head regretfully, but steadfastly refused. “That phantom has me scared out o’ my skin,” she declared.

“If I could prove to you that the phantom is a real horse, Mrs. Thurmond,” Nancy asked, “would you stay?”

“ ’Course I would! I’m not afraid of a live critter.”

“Then just let me have a little time. I feel sure I’ll be able to show you how the trick is done.”

The others chimed in, cajoling the cook to give Nancy a chance. Bess added, “I don’t know how we’ll get along without you and all those wonderful pies.”

Mrs. Thurmond considered a moment. “All right. One more night.” At their delighted thanks she flushed with pleasure and marched off to

remove her hat. When she returned, the girls and Aunt Bet helped her clear the table. Before long, the horn of the ranch wagon sounded and Nancy left with her friends.

Dave, Tex, and Bud were in the yard talking to Uncle Ed. Bud was holding a guitar in a case. A short distance away Shorty lounged against the horse trailer, which had been hitched to the back of the ranch wagon.

As the girls came up, they heard Uncle Ed say, "You go ahead, boys, and have a good time. You've earned a holiday."

"You might need help with those palominos when the vet comes," said Dave. He glanced uneasily at Nancy and she understood at once how he felt.

"I'll be glad to excuse you, Dave, if you feel you ought to stay," she said.

"No, that's not necessary," Ed Rawley said.

As Dave thanked him, Nancy noticed Tex talking quietly to Alice. Flushed with excitement, she smiled happily and hurried to Nancy's side. "Tex's brother Jack is going to be in the rodeo and Tex says Jack would like to take me to the barbecue and dance. He's fifteen—Jack, I mean. Is it all right, Uncle Ed?" she asked, blushing.

The rancher nodded and chuckled. "I've met the young man. Go ahead."

As Alice went back to tell Tex, Nancy and George looked knowingly at Bess, who dimpled.

"Now how did you fix that, Miss Cupid?" her cousin asked.

"It was easy," Bess replied. "I remembered Tex had mentioned his brother was coming into Tumbleweed for the rodeo."

"Come on!" called Tex. "Let's roll!" The others hastened to the ranch wagon.

Bud, carrying his guitar, climbed in the back of the wagon, and Shorty joined him. Tex, George, and Bess sat in the middle, while Nancy and Alice took seats next to Dave, who was at the wheel.

"I've never been to a rodeo," Alice said as they started out. "What's it like?"

Tex grinned. "Well, Dave here is going to flip some fancy loops and so's Bud."

"He means they're going to rope cows," said Bess.

"Steers," Tex corrected.

Bess asked Tex what he was going to do. “Dog a steer,” was his reply.

Dave chuckled at Alice’s puzzled look. “He’ll ride his horse alongside a running steer and leap aboard.”

“Then he’ll bite the dust,” Bud teased.

“Not Tex!” Dave rejoined. “He’s a real salty bulldogger!”

“And Shorty there is a broncobuster,” Tex added.

“And I’m fixin’ to win, too,” Shorty declared. “Wouldn’t be the first time.” He went on to brag about several occasions when he had won prizes in rodeos.

While he talked, Nancy was quiet, thinking hard about the phantom horse. “Oh, how I wish Chief could talk!” she said to herself. “He’s been closer to it than anyone.” She wondered again why the dog had been held prisoner.

Suddenly Nancy thought of the light she had seen in the spring house shortly before the ghost horse had appeared. With a thrill of excitement, Nancy suddenly figured out how the trick could have been done! It was all she could do to keep from exclaiming aloud. She decided to say nothing to the other girls until she had an opportunity to prove her theory. “And I can’t do that until after dark,” she thought.

When they reached Tumbleweed, Dave drove slowly through the streets crowded with visitors. Many of the men had on fringed buckskin jackets and some of the women wore long pioneer dresses with sunbonnets. Others wore graceful squaw dresses.

Suddenly Nancy spotted a drably dressed gray-haired man standing in the doorway of a store-the man who called himself Bursey! At that moment his eyes met hers and he darted away in the crowd.

Nancy’s heart sank. The sheriff, who was on his way to or from the cabin, had missed his quarry!

Nancy wondered what to do-get word to the authorities? Dave interrupted her thoughts by saying that the rodeo would not start for an hour. “We have to go and check in,” he said. “What do you girls want to do in the meantime?”

“Oh, we’ll keep busy,” Nancy replied.

When the cowboys had left, she suggested that Bess take Alice and hunt for Bursey. She and George would go in another direction. “Let’s meet at Mary Deer’s shop.”

They all arrived half an hour later. There had been no trace of the man. “He probably left town in a hurry,” George declared.

The store was crowded and Mary Deer had an assistant working behind the counter. While the other girls looked at jewelry, Nancy beckoned her Indian friend aside and asked if she would keep a secret. When Mary promised, Nancy told her that she hoped to find the treasure in the cliff dwellings, and inquired the best way to get to them.

“There are stairs up the front,” said Mary, “but they are not safe. You had best come down from above.”

She explained that at the far end of the cliff apartments there was a huge slab of rock which had been used as a lookout point by the ancient Indians. Stairs led from the rock down to the top row of dwellings. Nancy thanked Mary and promised to let her know if she discovered anything.

By this time the other girls had bought Indian jewelry, and after Nancy had purchased a turquoise pillbox for Hannah, they left the shop. The foursome followed the arrows to the far end of town where they found the rodeo arena, a short distance from the stockyard. Nancy bought tickets at the front gate, and they all found seats in the stands.

Bess sighed. “I’m so hot, I’d like to have a cold drink and I think I need a hot dog to go with it.”

George grinned. “Eating is really a very fattening hobby, dear cousin.”

Before Bess could retort, a voice came from the loud-speaker. “Telephone call for Miss Nancy Drew in the booth next to the refreshment stand.”

The girls looked at one another in amazement. Afraid that something had gone wrong at the ranch, Nancy excused herself and hurried off. She made her way through the crowd to the first telephone booth beside the hot-dog stand. As she reached it, the door opened and Bursey stepped out with a grin. At the same moment a tall figure in black glided to her side—Mr. Diamond!

Bursey’s strong fingers closed on Nancy’s wrist. “You’re coming with us!” he growled. “And don’t yell or you’ll be sorry!”

CHAPTER XVII

An Interrupted Program

BEFORE Nancy could say anything to the two men, Bess's voice rang out. "She is not going with you!"

"Let her go!" George ordered.

As Bursey whirled in surprise, Nancy jerked her wrist from his grasp. Diamond's startled look changed to a scowl and the two ran away fast, disappearing under the grandstand.

"Girls, you were wonderful!" Nancy exclaimed, recovering from her shock. "But those men must be caught!"

The three friends dashed after the fugitives, all the while looking for a deputy but saw none. Finally they gave up the chase-the two men had vanished.

"I'll go to the sheriff's office and report this," Nancy said.

"Not alone!" George declared. "We're sticking close to you for the rest of the afternoon. It's a good thing I let Bess talk me into coming down for a hot dog."

Bess thought she had better go back to Alice, who was holding their seats in the grandstand. George accompanied Nancy to Sheriff Curtis' office, where the young sleuth left a note for the absent lawman about the kidnapping attempt.

When they returned to the rodeo arena, they heard a burst of cheering. "Dave just won the roping contest!" cried Alice as Nancy and George took their seats. The delighted girls clapped loudly.

"Bud was good too," Bess put in loyally, as Dave walked to the judges' stand. Modestly he accepted the first prize, a pair of silver spurs, and left the arena to another burst of applause.

Next came the broncobusters. The girls watched, thrilled, as one after another of the contestants hurtled into the arena on the bucking horses.

Shorty came last. Shrill whistles filled the air as he tried to stick in the saddle for the required number of minutes.

"Look at 'im sunfish!" came a shout from the stands as the frantic horse pitched high into the air, his back arched.

Suddenly a shot rang out from the judges' stand. "Time's up! Shorty wonl" George exclaimed.

The stands erupted into cheers. At the same time, the bronc shook his rider loose. The winner rolled over in the dust, picked himself up, retrieved his hat and waved it at the spectators. As the bronc was shunted out of the arena by attendants, Shorty strode to the judges' stand. He claimed his prize, a silver buckle, and held it up for all to see. Then he swaggered out of the arena.

After the rodeo the girls met their dates outside the front gate. Tex introduced his brother Jack, a tall freckle-faced boy, whose friendly manner immediately put Alice at ease. Quickly Nancy warned the boys about Bursey and Diamond.

Dave looked worried and Jack spoke up. "I don't know what this is all about, but no one will get Alice away from me until I turn her over to Nancy after the dance!"

Nancy and Dave led the way to the ranch wagon. "Shorty said he'd come along later," he remarked.

On the drive to the barbecue grounds, Nancy quietly told him her deduction about the treasure. Dave was excited and said he hoped she was right.

About a mile beyond Tumbleweed he parked in a grove of willow trees beside a narrow stream. The grounds were set with many long wooden tables and benches, and overhead were strings of small electric lights.

"Come on, gals," said Tex. "We're goin' to put on a big feed!" He led them toward a long serving table. Four men passed by, each carrying a shovel bearing a big burlap-wrapped package. These were dumped onto the table.

"There goes the meat," said Bud. "It's been buried in the barbecue pit since last night."

"Cookin' nice an' slow over hot stones," Tex added.

"When the burlap fell away, the fragrance of the steaming meat was irresistible. All the girls enjoyed generous servings, with a spicy relish and potato salad.

By the time they had finished their desserts of ice cream and

Nancy's chocolate cake, the colored lights overhead came on. A stout middle-aged man mounted the dance platform in the center of the grove and announced that he was master of ceremonies. Seeing Bud's guitar, he called on him for some cowboy songs.

Bud played "I'm a Lonesome Cowboy," and everyone joined in enthusiastically. He followed with a number of other old favorites. Finally he strummed some Gold Rush songs, including "Sweet Betsy from Pike."

The cheers and applause had not yet died down when Shorty stepped onto the platform. Ignoring the master of ceremonies, he leaned toward the microphone and said, "Folks, how'd you like me to do my imitations?"

At the scattered handclapping and whistles, the stout man nodded and stepped back. Shorty cupped his hands around his mouth, closed his eyes, and the long mournful hoot of an owl filled the night.

"He's really good," Bess whispered.

"I'll bet he can also do a whining dog," Nancy said meaningfully.

Next, the cowboy announced a coyote and produced several realistic howls. Suddenly in mid-howl he spotted Nancy in the audience. His jaw dropped and he stood silent before the microphone. Staring at her, he stammered that his act was over and left the platform. The girls exchanged baffled glances.

Dave grinned. "That was one surprised coyote, all right! He thought his pals had got rid of you, Nancy."

Just then a band of three musicians began tuning up and a square-dancing contest was announced. Alice suggested that the four couples enter as a set, and the others agreed enthusiastically.

Of the four groups in the contest, Nancy's was called first. The young people lined up on the platform, facing each other in couples. At the sound of the lively music they began to dance. The fiddle player called the steps and played his tunes fast.

"Swing your partners and a do-si-do!"

Whirling past the edge of the platform, Nancy glimpsed Shorty glowering at her.

When the breathless dancers returned to their table, Nancy told the others of the incident. "It's going to be hard to shake Shorty from now on. I'm afraid he and his pals will watch us so closely we'll have no chance to go after the treasure."

While the other sets of dancers competed, Nancy pondered on how

to make sure the girls were not followed to the cliff houses.

At the end of the contest, the crowd voted by applause and the Shadow Ranch group won easily. Nancy was sent to the platform to claim the prize.

The master of ceremonies handed her a pink slip of paper. “You take this to the food table over yonder, young lady, and they will give you and your friends a big ice-cold watermelon!”

Nancy thanked the man, then turned to the audience and said, “I would like to make an announcement that I believe will interest everybody in this area. My friends and I think we know where the famous long-lost Valentine treasure is hidden.”

An excited rustle ran through the crowd and cries of “Where?”

Nancy smiled. “I won’t say anything more about it now, but tomorrow a few Shadow Ranch men are going out to do some digging.”

As Nancy hurried from the platform, she saw Sheriff Curtis making his way toward her. He spoke of his futile search on the mountain and his regret that the desperadoes were still at large. “I’m sure glad you outwitted ’em this afternoon Watch your step.”

Then he joined the young people at their table.

George asked Nancy, “What was the meaning of that announcement you made?”

In a low voice the young sleuth said, “Everybody look happy—not as if we’re talking about anything important-and I’ll explain.”

Dave obligingly gave a broad grin. “I’ll collect our prize.”

He soon returned and began cutting and serving the watermelon. Meanwhile, the others listened, smiling and laughing as Nancy told them that the Shadow Ranch cowboys were to act as decoys while the girls went to the cliff dwellings to search for the treasure.

“Shorty will no doubt alert Bursey and Diamond and they’ll be keeping an eye on the ranch.”

Sheriff Curtis praised Nancy for her plan and said he would follow

the decoy group. “I’ll nab the varmints when they move against the cowboys.”

His blue eyes were sober as he said, “I can see you’re a capable gal, Miss Drew, but you got to be extra careful from now on, ’cause those thievin’ hombres’ll want to keep all o’ you tenderfeet quiet.”

“We’ll stay close to the girls,” Dave promised, and the cowboys permitted no one to cut in during the dancing that followed.

When the party was over, Jack said good night to Alice at the ranch wagon and promised to telephone her soon. As Nancy and her friends climbed into the car, Shorty came hurrying up to join them.

Dave drove to the corrals behind the arena where Tex and Bud picked up the horses and trailer. Shorty got out, too, and walked into a phone booth at the edge of the parking area. He did not stay long.

“I’ll bet he called Diamond and Bursey to tell them what I said,” Nancy declared.

As Dave started the drive home, Shorty questioned Nancy about her announcement. She laughed and replied that he would see later what she meant. Before he could ask any more questions, Bud struck a chord on his guitar and started a cowboy song. Shorty gave up talking and sat sullenly while the others sang all during the ride.

Although she joined in the songs, Nancy’s thoughts dwelled on the plan she had made for proving to Mrs. Thurmond that the phantom horse was a trick. She was pleased to note that the moon had gone behind heavy clouds and the night was very dark.

When they reached the ranch, the cowboys hurried off to relieve Ed Rawley and the foreman who had done guard duty during their absence. The girls went to the house where they found Mrs. Rawley in the lighted living room. Chief lay by the fireplace.

“I felt safer with him in here,” Aunt Bet explained.

Nancy asked the others to accompany her to the kitchen. There they found Mrs. Thurmond seated at the big table reading a magazine.

“I believe I can show you now how the phantom was made to appear,” Nancy said.

The cook looked skeptical, then exclaimed nervously as Nancy turned out the lights. With a mysterious smile, she slipped outside and hurried down the portico. Soon she returned. “All set? Look through the screen door.”

Her friends complied and stared into the darkness. Suddenly Mrs. Thurmond gave a scream and Mrs. Rawley gasped. Bobbing toward

them, about three feet above the portico, were tiny glowing specks!

"Oh!" moaned the cook. "Phantom spots! Take 'em away!"

Nancy opened the door and the shining specks floated into the room!

CHAPTER XVIII

The Black Phantom

As the watchers stared amazed, the glowing specks stopped floating forward and hung in the darkness.

"Oh!" Mrs. Thurmond quavered. "They shine just like the ghost horse!"

Nancy switched on the light. Before them stood Chief, a large rubber ball clutched in his jaws.

Smiling at the flabbergasted onlookers, Nancy said, "Do you see how the phantom trick was worked?"

"I do," George said promptly. "Phosphorescent paint on the dog's teeth."

"Where are the specks now?" Mrs. Thurmond asked as Chief dropped the ball.

"They don't show when the lights are on. At the time Chief disappeared—after he chased the phantom horse—the spots were on his teeth," the young sleuth explained. "I thought perhaps he had bitten the ghost, but when I examined him in daylight, of course I found no evidence."

"The gang must have washed him," remarked Bess.

"But they never thought of his teeth," Nancy said, "and fragments of the paint remained."

"How did you get onto the idea?" Aunt Bet asked.

Nancy reminded the others of her suspicion that Chief had been muzzled and taken away because the gang feared there was a clue to the apparition on him.

"I learned in chemistry class that phosphorescent paint glows in the dark after it first has been exposed to light," she went on. "I remembered that each time I'd seen the phantom horse there had been a light in the spring house just before. I put two and two together and

decided that the apparition was a real horse. He was covered with a soft thin material which had been coated with phosphorescent paint and exposed to light in the spring house by one of the gang members."

Mrs. Thurmond drew a deep breath and turned to Nancy. "You're a downright marvel, that's what you are, young lady!"

Nancy blushed. "You'll stay now, won't you?" And the others all added their pleas.

" 'Course I will," Mrs. Thurmond declared stoutly. "You just show me the varmint that's been doing this no-good trick and I'll give him a piece o' my mind!"

Before going to bed, Nancy told Aunt Bet and Uncle Ed of her plan for the following day. The rancher assured her he would cooperate. At breakfast the girls talked lightheartedly of their all-day horseback ride.

"Where you gals fixin' to go?" Shorty asked.

"We'll start up Shadow Mountain," Nancy replied vaguely. "After that, we'll see."

Mr. Rawley broke in to appoint Tex and Bud as his helpers on the "treasure" expedition.

When the meal was over, Nancy took Dave aside and told him that if she and the other girls found Valentine's hoard, they would light a fire on the lookout rock.

"Good," he replied. "Then I'll drive down the valley in the truck and climb up to the cliff houses by the front steps to help you bring the treasure back to the ranch."

Half an hour later Uncle Ed, Tex, and Bud saddled up for their trip. Shorty hung around, eager to help as two pack horses were led out. One was loaded with digging tools and the other with supplies.

"What's the second animal for?" asked Sanders, who had been told the secret.

The rancher owner grinned. "For the treasure."

The trio headed down the valley away from Tumbleweed. Shorty watched them for a minute, then hurried into the woods behind the ranch house. Strolling toward the stable, Nancy suspected that Bursey and Diamond were hiding among the trees, waiting to see which way the "treasure" party had gone.

In the tack room, Dave helped Nancy pack small digging tools into a saddlebag and roll a spade in a blanket. The cowboy then saddled the girls' horses and slung the gear aboard two of them. Mrs. Thurmond

brought lunches which Dave added to a pack as Nancy called to her companions that everything was ready.

Before they mounted, Nancy suggested that they cross the big meadow. “We’ll ride up Shadow Mountain from there.”

“But it’s in the opposite direction from the cliff dwellings,” Alice whispered.

“That’s the idea,” Nancy replied. “Just in case Shorty suspects a trick and decides to follow us.”

Dave pulled out a stub of pencil and drew a map for Nancy on the back of an envelope. It showed a trail going east across the mountain to the cliff dwellings.

Twenty minutes later the girls were heading up Shadow Mountain. As they jogged along the trail, Nancy studied the map and noted that Dave’s route began not far from the cabin.

“We can go there first,” she said. “If the gang is on a wild-goose chase, now would be a good time to search for their hiding place.”

Though the girls were eager to go on with their real purpose, they spent the morning wandering over various trails. “If anyone is following us, I hope he’ll think we’re just out for pleasure and give up the chase,” Nancy remarked.

In early afternoon they stopped beside a stream to eat their lunch, then rode straight for the cabin. After half an hour, however, they were brought up short by huge boulders on the path.

“A rockfall!” George exclaimed. “We’ll have to detour.”

The riders backtracked, then crossed a steep stony slope, so treacherous that they were forced to dismount and lead their horses slowly. Finally, they reached clear trail again. It was midafternoon when Alice cried out, “There’s the cabin! I see the roof.”

The foursome rode up the slope and ground-hitched their horses. Cautiously they made their way toward the cabin. The door was open and no one was inside.

Nancy led the way behind the cabin and noticed again how close the back window was to the brush screen and rock wall.

“What a funny place to put a window!” Bess remarked.

“Yes. That’s one of the reasons I feel sure a hiding place is back here somewhere,” Nancy replied. “I think the window was used as an escape exit from the cabin.”

The girls examined the close-growing chaparral. A few feet to the

side of the window, George discovered a break in the thorny brush.

Nancy slipped into it, and one by one the girls struggled through and entered a narrow cleft in the rock wall.

A few yards inside the opening Nancy pointed out horseshoe, paw, and shoe prints. “Let’s follow the prints,” she suggested. “I have a hunch this path might lead to Valentine’s hideout.”

The girls hurried to their mounts, and soon were riding through the narrow pass with only a strip of blue sky visible above them.

After a while even that was blotted out by an overhang. The path grew gloomy and wound sharply around jagged outcrops.

By the time the riders saw daylight again, the sun was low in the sky. They rode up a gentle slope and found themselves on a high plateau. Some distance ahead was a long, straight rocky parapet about twelve feet high.

Nancy reined up sharply. “Look!” she cried out. Built against the wall was a three-sided stone enclosure with an old wooden gate. Inside pranced a handsome black stallion.

“The phantom horse!” Nancy exclaimed.

As the four riders approached, the animal whinnied and reared, backing toward a crude lean-to stable.

“Maybe the trick trappings are in there,” George said.

Nancy dismounted quickly, opened a wooden gate, and slipped into the enclosure. The black steed nickered nervously and shied away, but Nancy talked soothingly to him as she walked forward.

There was a pile of hay in the corner of the stable. Nancy felt under it. In a few moments her fingers encountered something soft and she pulled out a bundle of white material. She carried it outside and closed the gate behind her.

“The phantom costumel” Bess exclaimed as Nancy shook out the filmy cloth.

“It’s Japan silk, a very thin material used for theatrical effects,” Nancy told the girls. She tucked the cloth into her saddlebag.

“This stable looks old,” Bess remarked. “I don’t think the gang built it.”

“You’re right!” Alice exclaimed, and pointed to a barely discernible heart scratched on the gate.

“Then Valentine’s hideout must be near here,” Nancy said.

As the girls looked around, Nancy noticed a huge rock jutting from the far end of the parapet. With a thrill of excitement she recognized the lookout point. “We’re on top of the cliff houses!” she exclaimed. “Let’s get the wood ready for the fire, then start searching for the treasure.”

Beyond the lookout rock the girls could see a grove of trees. They rode over and tethered their horses. The wind moaned through the fir trees and Nancy shivered. She took her sweater from the saddle horn and threw it over her shoulders. It was nearly dusk, so the girls hung flashlights on their belts.

Then they collected wood for the signal fire and carried it to the lookout rock just as the sun set. Nancy was the last to make her way off the rock. To one side of it was a short flight of worn steps going down to the top row of cliff apartments.

Nancy was about to lead the descent when they heard the howl of a coyote. She stopped short.

“What’s the matter?” asked Alice.

“Sh—listen!” Everyone froze. “I hope that’s a real coyote,” said Nancy.

Bess gasped. “You mean Shorty—”

“If the gang has discovered our ruse, they may have backtracked and traced us here,” George said.

Nancy nodded. “We’d better not turn our lights on.”

Hugging the parapet, the girls went down the steps to the narrow walk which ran in front of the apartments. To their left was a sheer drop-off.

For a moment they stood still, breathless at the height and the silence. Suddenly there came a thump from the first room.

Bess grabbed George’s arm and Alice gasped. Quietly Nancy stepped to the open doorway and peered into the gloom.

A man was lying on the floor!

CHAPTER XIX

The Cliff's Secret

"HELP!" called a feeble voice as Nancy shone her flashlight into the dim room.

"Daddy!" cried Alice and brushed past Nancy. She threw herself beside a thin gray-haired man who was bound hand and foot.

"Uncle Ross!" exclaimed Bess and George.

The older girls swiftly untied his bonds. Crying for joy, Alice helped her father sit up and the two embraced.

After introductions, Mr. Regor explained that he had made the thumping noise by kicking his heels. "My throat was so parched I couldn't yell out to you."

Then Alice's father told his story. "I've been a prisoner in the cabin for six months—ever since they kidnapped me at the time of the bank robbery. But this morning the gang intended to go after the Rawley treasure party, so they moved me here, where they thought I wouldn't be discovered."

"Why did you go to the bank the night of the robbery, Daddy?" Alice asked.

"To get some important papers I had left there. I was working at home and needed them." He said he had interrupted the robbery, and the gang took him along to keep him from identifying them.

"They're Westerners," he went on, "and have used this cabin hideout before. The idea was to stay here for a cooling-off period."

"How many are in the gang?" Nancy asked.

"Three. At first Shorty and Sid Brice stayed in the cabin with me while Al Diamond lived in Tumbleweed and brought us supplies."

"Who's Sid Brice, Uncle Ross?" Bess asked.

"The gray-haired fellow who looks like me."

“He calls himself Bursey,” Nancy told him.

“I know,” said Mr. Regor. “One day A1 Diamond came to the cabin all excited. He’d talked to an Indian girl named Mary Deer and learned all about Valentine’s treasure. So Diamond decided that the gang should go after it and sent Shorty to get a job on the ranch. He was supposed to spread the phantom-horse story and drive the Rawleys off.”

Nancy looked troubled. “Mr. Regor, what happened to the bank loot?”

“It was hidden in the cabin until Shorty reported that you girls had spotted the place.

“The next day Diamond and Brice moved the money to the ghost town and made me go along. They had just finished hiding the loot in the old hotel when we heard your horses approaching. Brice hustled me down the hill. All I could do was drop one of my crayons and hope somebody would find it.”

“Oh, we did, Daddy!” exclaimed Alice.

Mr. Regor said Diamond had remained in the ghost town to spy on the girls. “Later he told us he had caused a rockslide.”

Nancy mentioned finding the coffee cups on the table in the cabin.

“Yes. We heard your horses clattering up the slope, so Brice forced me out the window in back and into the little rocky passage. He had the dog on a rope and made him go too. But later he broke loose.”

“We found one of your pictures on the table, Uncle Ross,” said George.

The man smiled. “I’ve been drawing pictures to keep myself busy. Brice has been selling them and keeping the money for himself,” he added.

“Those terrible men! Have they mistreated you, Daddy?”

The bank president said he had not been hurt, but had been underfed and was weak. “I once heard Brice say there was time enough to get rid of me when they left Shadow Mountain.”

While Alice told her father all that had happened so far, Nancy, Bess, and George flashed their lights about Mr. Regor’s prison.

The floor was littered with pieces of broken pottery and rock. Beside the door Nancy noticed a flat-topped boulder. “The Indians probably used it for a table, or a seat,” she thought. Nearby was a large rectangular chunk of stone.

The three girls switched off their lights and stepped outside. With Nancy in the lead, the three friends walked close to the wall of the cliff dwellings. They searched one apartment after another for the treasure, but always found the same thing: shards and crumbled rocks.

As the girls emerged from one of the middle rooms, Nancy noticed a crude wooden ladder resting against the wall and leading to the roof.

"It's just an old ladder—probably put there by the cliff dwellers," said Bess.

Nancy did not agree. "There are nails in this. Perhaps Valentine brought it here. I'd like to climb up."

"Let's finish searching the rooms," George said.

"Okay."

As they neared the end of the row, the young sleuth exclaimed, "Look!" The last doorway was neatly blocked with an enormous stone.

"Valentine's hideout!" exclaimed George. "He must have put that rock there to keep intruders out!"

"But how did he get in?" Bess asked, puzzled. "The stone's too big to be moved much on this little ledge."

"I know!" exclaimed Nancy. "Come on!" She hastened back to the ladder. Swiftly she attached her flashlight to her belt and slipped her arms into her sweater.

By the time Bess and George caught up to Nancy, she had begun to climb. Breathlessly they watched her as she cautiously tested each rung. One splintered before she finally reached the roof.

"Nancy, be careful!" Bess cried fearfully.

Shading her flashlight, Nancy moved toward the end chamber and found a column of ancient footholds to the plateau above.

"Probably there's another set like them on the other side," she reasoned. "The ladder was Valentine's extra escape route."

Playing her flashlight over the surface, Nancy walked a dozen steps toward the end of the roof. Suddenly she spotted a large hole.

Shining her light into it, Nancy saw a pile of broken rock directly below. She gripped the sides of the opening and lowered herself into the chamber.

"O-oo, it's musty in here!"

In one corner lay a moldering blanket and saddle. Nearby was a pickax. On the wall above these Nancy found an indistinct carved

letter. She brushed away the dust.

V—for Valentine!

Nancy's pulse pounded with joy and excitement.

But where was the treasure? "It can't be buried," she thought. "The floor is solid stone."

When Nancy lifted the blanket, it fell into shreds at her touch. There was nothing beneath it. Her eyes fell upon a large pottery vase in the corner. The vessel was nearly three feet high and had a wide mouth. Nancy beamed her light into it.

Standing on end and level with the top of the vase was a metal box!

"This might be it!" Nancy exulted. She put down her flashlight, reached in, and lifted out the heavy box. It slipped from her grasp and hit the floor, jolting off a rusted padlock.

Nancy pulled open the lid. Before her lay hundreds of small shining gold hearts!

"Oh!"

Beneath the layer of gold pieces lay stacks of United States bank notes and a chamois bag. It contained an assortment of precious jewels!

"It can't be real!" Nancy said aloud. "I'm dreaming!"

But Nancy's mind clicked back to reality. "I can't get this chest back through the ceiling, that's for sure." She eyed the pickax. "Maybe I can pry the rock away from the door."

Nancy worked the point of the pickax beneath the rock. She pulled hard. The slab moved a trifle! She tried again. This time the rock moved about a foot. Nancy pushed the treasure box through the opening, turned off her flashlight, and squeezed outside.

"George! Bess!" The girls came running and Nancy told of her find. "Take the treasure back to Alice and Mr. Regor," she directed. "I'll light the signal fire."

Cautiously Nancy crawled out onto the jutting rock and took a packet of matches from her pocket. She struck one, shielding it from the wind, and held it to the kindling.

As the smoke arose, a gruff voice behind her suddenly barked, "Put out that firel"

CHAPTER XX

Daring Tactics

THE voice was A1 Diamond's. Nancy was trapped on the jutting rock, far above the valley!

"Stamp out that blaze!" the man repeated sharply, "or I'll knock you off there!"

"All right!" Nancy's brain was in a whirl. She delayed until Diamond bellowed again, then she kicked the pile of smoldering wood from the rock. It burst into a shower of sparks and flame on the way down.

Diamond snarled, "Come here!" When Nancy made her way back to the cliff, he said gloatingly:

"You think you're smart. As for those phony treasure hunters, we cut out of that trap when I spotted the sheriff trailing us."

Nancy's spirits sank as A1 continued to storm. "You've made it too hot for us here, and you'll pay for it."

He said the gang was on its way to the ghost town to pick up the bank loot when they stopped at the cabin. Shorty found fresh horse tracks and figured the girls had a line on the treasure.

"He saw you gathering wood and gave us his coyote signal."

Nancy's captor bragged that he and his partners had hurried to the top of the steps and watched from above. Seeing the girls emerging from Regor's prison, the three men had sneaked down into one of the cliff-dwelling rooms to spy on them.

"Finally we saw you hurry by, and then your friends showed up carrying something heavy. I said to myself, 'There goes the treasure. How nice to have Nancy Drew do all the work for us!' "

"You didn't harm Bess and George!" Nancy said hotly.

"Oh no," came the sarcastic reply. "My boys let 'em get to Regor's prison, then they closed in."

Nancy fumbled for her flashlight and switched it on.

"Turn that off! I don't want anybody getting nosy. Hurry up! Get going!"

Nancy hoped desperately that Dave had seen the signal fire. In order to give him time to make the treacherous ascent, Nancy hugged the wall and moved as slowly as possible.

"Step on it!" Diamond barked. Finally he pushed her into the prison room. In one comer she saw the red glow of a flashlight shaded by a cloth, and near it the dark figures of two men. But she could see nothing else in the room.

"We're okay, Nancy," came George's voice. "They made us sit on the floor."

"And smashed our flashlights," said Bess.

Diamond spoke up sharply. "Shorty, where's that treasure?"

"Can't see it, Boss. You told me to keep the light covered."

Diamond fumbled about before giving an exclamation of disgust. "Regor, are you hiding it?"

"Let my father alone!" Alice cried out. "He doesn't have anything."

Instantly Nancy's foot reached for the large chunk of stone she had seen near the door. Quickly she shrugged her sweater from her shoulders and it dropped over the stone.

"All right, Mr. Diamond. Here it is!"

As she spoke, Nancy stooped and gathered the rock into her sweater.

"I'll take it!"

"No, you won't!" With a mighty lunge Nancy hurled the stone through the door and over the side of the cliff. Seconds later it crashed on the rocks below.

For a moment there was a stunned silence. Then Diamond exploded. "You've played your last trick on me, Nancy Drew. Brice! Shorty! Tie 'em up!"

Nancy sat on the stone bench beside the door and waited coolly while Shorty lashed her ankles together.

Diamond said, "Brice, you and I'll go down to the valley and find the treasure. Shorty, guard these girls till you get my signal."

At this Nancy chuckled. "Poor Shorty! By the time you reach the valley, your pals and the treasure will be gone."

The cowboy stopped his tying and turned to Diamond. “Let Brice stay. I’m through stickin’ my neck out!”

“Yes,” Nancy declared, “suspicion was on you from the beginning. You wrecked the pump and cut the telephone wire.”

“All right,” Shorty said resentfully. “And I put the generator out of whack and pulled the nettle trick.”

“Shut up!” Diamond ordered.

George spoke up. “They kept you busy, Shorty. After you imitated poor Chief you found the clue in Nancy’s watch and later stole the green liniment bottle.”

Out of the darkness came Bess’s voice. “Who ransacked our room?”

“Brice,” replied Shorty, “and that’s about all he did!”

“Is that so!” Diamond spluttered angrily. “Without my brains, you’d both be nowhere!”

“What do you mean?” Brice interrupted. “I cut the fences and knocked down the windmill!”

Now the men’s voices shrilled in anger as each claimed importance for his part in the conspiracy.

Diamond’s voice rose with fury. “Listen,” he raged, “I got the idea for the phantom horse. I bought the silk and paint and trained the stallion to come to my whistle.”

“We helped you!” Shorty retorted. He reminded Diamond that he and Brice had put the trappings on the stallion for the phantom performance.

Ross Regor cut in. “You almost caught them at it one night, Nancy. Scared them so badly they called off the phantom. I heard Brice say he had to slip from the spring house into the cellar through the secret opening.”

“Quit wasting time,” Diamond shrieked. “We’ve got to clear out of here!”

“Now take it easy, Diamond,” Shorty said with a ring of authority. “It’s me and Brice agin you. We’ll go for the treasure. You stay here.”

Diamond fumed. “Okay. But don’t try any funny business. And come right back.”

Without a word, the other two men went out the door, taking the light with them. The captives heard Diamond make his way through the darkness to the back of the chamber, then heard the creak of a hinge.

A soft laugh came from the gang leader. “In case you’re wondering, I’m opening a wooden box where we keep dynamite and fuses.”

Gasps came from the prisoners. “You can’t do that!” George cried out.

“I’m forced to. Ross Regor knows too much, and I can’t afford to let him go. Too bad, Nancy Drew, that you butted into my affairs.”

“I’ll stay,” Mr. Regor cried out. “But don’t harm these girls!”

“No! And as soon as I light the fuse, I’ll lam out of here.”

Crack! A match flared in Diamond’s hand.

“Wait!” Nancy exclaimed. “You’ll blow up the treasure!”

The match hovered in mid-air. “What?”

“That was just a big stone I threw over the cliff,” Nancy admitted.

She turned on her flashlight and swept it about the room, making certain the beam hit the entrance several times. Someone just might notice it.

“Here! Give me that!” Diamond snatched the light. “Now where’s the thing you girls carried?”

“Here,” said Bess, “we’re sitting on it.”

Diamond pushed her and George aside and flipped open the chest. “Good night!” He grabbed a handful of the gold hearts and let them run through his fingers. Then he closed the lid and began to carry the box toward the entrance.

Just then the rattle of falling stones came from below. Flushed with success, Diamond called out, “Shorty! Bricel I have the treasure! Fellows, we’re rich!”

Voices! Then a light flashed into the room.

“Hold it, Diamond!”

“Dave!” Nancy cried’out.

Diamond made a break for freedom, but George put out her foot and the criminal fell into the strong arms of Sheriff Curtis. Handcuffs clicked shut.

The girls and Mr. Regor gave shouts of joy at the sight of Dave, the sheriff, his deputy, and Mr. Rawley. As the captives were untied, Ross Regor told how cleverly Nancy had played for time.

Dave smiled. “She’s the smartest little tenderfoot I ever saw.” Then he related how the decoys and the sheriff’s party had lost the gang

and gone back to Shadow Ranch.

"When we saw the fire falling, I figured something like this had happened."

Mr. Rawley said, "We didn't want to give ourselves away, so we drove up the valley with our lights off."

Dave added that Brice and Shorty had been caught on the way down. "But where's the treasure?"

"Here." George grinned.

Half an hour later, the party reached the valley floor just as the moon rose. Dave put Valentine's fortune in the ranch wagon while Nancy gave Sheriff Curtis a brief report. It was agreed that he would recover the stolen bank money from the ghost-town hotel in the morning and the cowboys were to bring in the girls' horses and the "phantom." The sullen prisoners were driven off in the sheriff's car.

As Dave headed the ranch wagon down the valley, he said he thought Nancy should have a share of the treasure. "I know the gold must be turned over to the state," Dave added. "But the jewels and bank notes should be worth a good sum. Nancy, since you found them, I feel a share rightfully belongs to you."

The young detective smiled, then graciously but firmly declined to accept any part of the find. "It was fun," she said.

The grateful cowboy grinned. "My brother and sister sure will be excited by the news."

A little later they turned into the gate. The ranch, bathed in silvery moonlight, looked peaceful.

Alice squeezed her father's hand. "Everything has turned out happily!"

"Thanks to Nancy Drew." Mr. Regor smiled.

"What are you going to do now, Nancy, without a mystery to solve?" Bess teased.

Her friend smiled. "Work on the sweater I'm knitting for Dad." She did not know then that soon she would become involved in *The Secret of Red Gate Farm.*

But George knew that Nancy and mystery were never far apart. She gave a sigh of mock sadness. "I hope your dad doesn't need that sweater very soon!"

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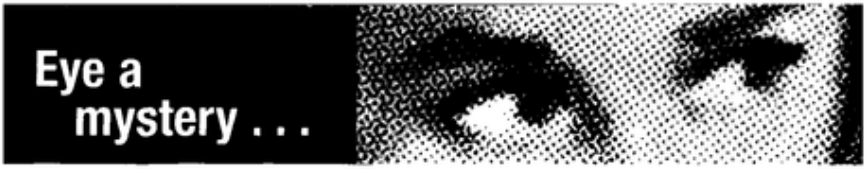

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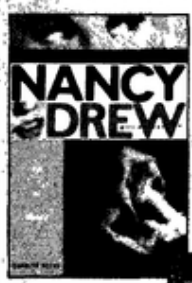

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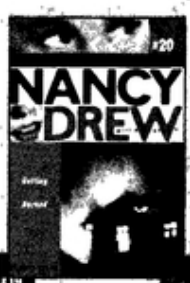

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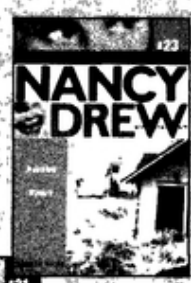

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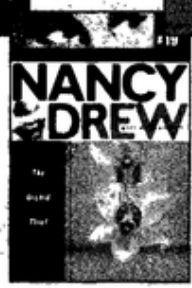

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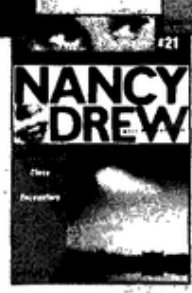

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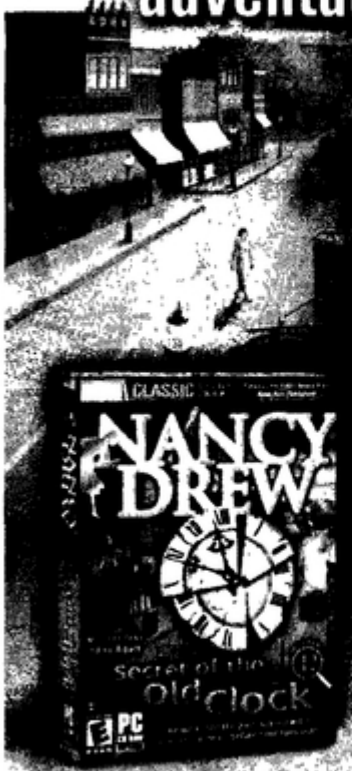

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The Secret of Red Gate Farm

BY CAROLYN KEENE

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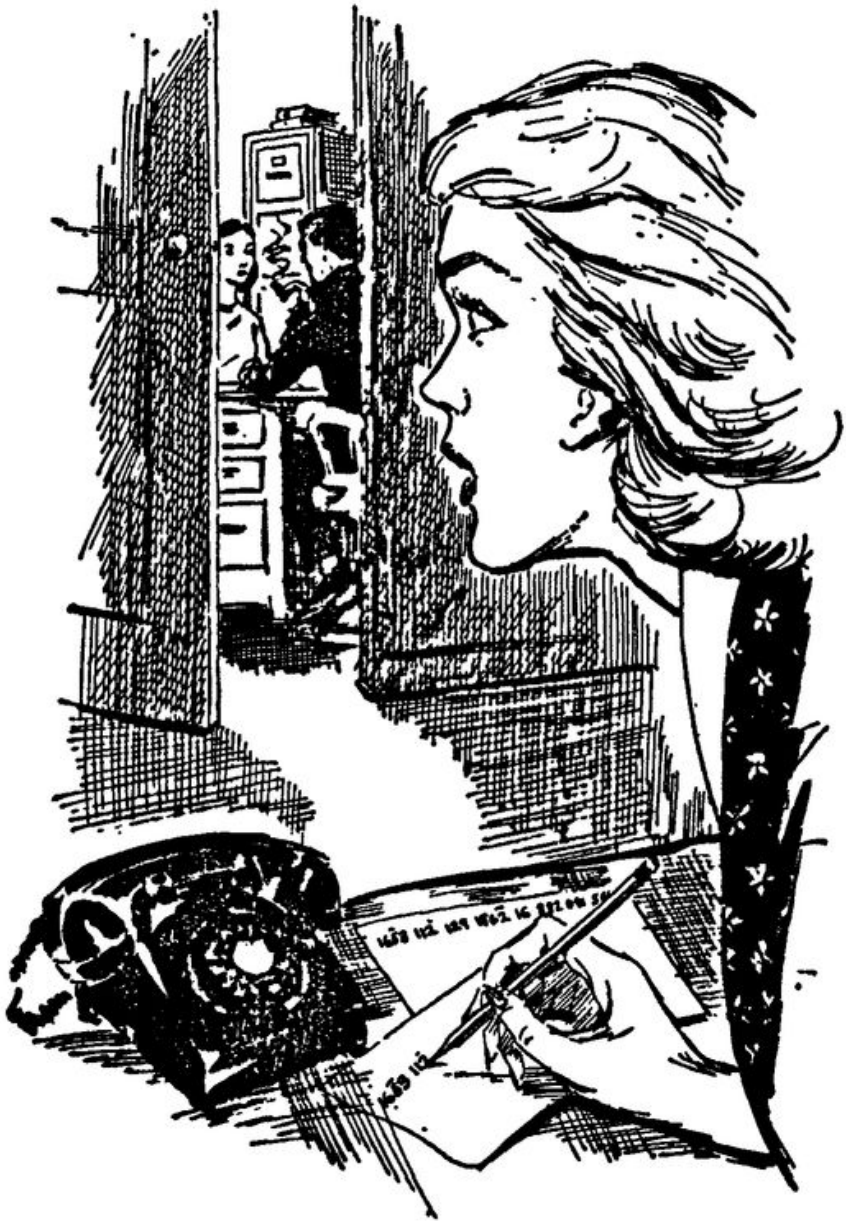

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The Secret of Red Gate Farm

BY CAROLYN KEENE

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CHAPTER I

A Strange Fragrance

"THAT Oriental-looking clerk in the perfume shop certainly acted mysterious," Bess Marvin declared, as she and her two friends ended their shopping trip and hurried down the street to the railroad station.

"Yes," Nancy Drew answered thoughtfully. "I wonder why she didn't want you to buy that bottle of Blue Jade?"

"The price would have discouraged me," spoke up Bess's cousin, dark-haired George Fayne. Her boyish name fitted her slim build and straightforward, breezy manner. "Twenty dollars an ounce!"

Blond, pretty Bess, who had a love for feminine luxuries, laughed. "I *was* extravagant, but I just couldn't resist such yummy perfume. After all, Dad gave me money to buy something frivolous, so I did!"

Nancy by this time was some distance ahead. "Hurry, girls, or we'll miss the next train to River Heights!" In her active life the attractive, titian-haired young sleuth had learned that being on time was important.

The three eighteen-year-old girls continued their frantic pace until the railroad station finally came into view.

Once at the station, they set down their packages to rest their arms. "Whew!" Bess sighed, looking at her watch. "I didn't think we'd make it, but we have two minutes to spare. And this would be one of July's hottest days!"

Nancy was pensive, still contemplating their encounter with the mysterious woman in the Oriental perfume shop. She had realized the Blue Jade was much too expensive, and the unwillingness of the young woman to part with it had stimulated her interest. Instinct had told Nancy that there must be some special reason why the saleswoman had been so reluctant to sell the Blue Jade.

Then another idea struck her. "You know," she said aloud, "it's possible that saleswoman deliberately raised the price of the perfume."

George frowned. "But why? You'd think she'd be thrilled to make such a good sale."

"Yes," Nancy agreed. "That's what perplexes me. There's something very strange about it and I'd certainly like to know what it is!"

"Oh, Nancy," teased George, "there you go again, dreaming up another mystery!"

Nancy's blue eyes sparkled as she thought of the prospect. The young sleuth had already solved several mysteries, some of them for her father, Carson Drew, a famous criminal lawyer. Among the cases on which Nancy had worked were *The Secret in the Old Clock and The Secret of Shadow Ranch.*

The girls heard the train approaching the station. As it came to a halt they quickly gathered up their packages and hurried aboard.

"What a day!" Bess exclaimed as she pushed on through the cars. The train was crowded, and the girls walked through several cars before they found any vacant seats.

George and Bess began discussing their many purchases. Bess gloated in particular over the bottle of exotic perfume. Even though the package was wrapped, it gave off a slight fragrance which was very pleasant.

George took a quick inventory of their purchases, then laughed. “Bess, it’s a good thing we got you to leave that last department store or you wouldn’t have had enough money left to buy your ticket home,” she stated bluntly. “You should practice self-control, the way I do.”

“Self-control!” Bess retorted. “I suppose you call a new hat, two dresses, three pairs of stockings, and a handbag self-control!”

George mustered a smile and decided to drop the subject.

Nancy leaned her head back against the cushion, and as she relaxed, studied the faces of the nearby passengers. She thought that the thin, sweet-looking girl who occupied the seat just opposite looked very tired, worried, and even ill. Nancy judged the girl to be her own age.

“Why are you so quiet, Nancy?” Bess demanded suddenly.

“Just resting,” Nancy returned.

She did not tell her friends that she had become interested in the nearby passenger, for George and Bess often teased her about her habit of scrutinizing strange faces. However, it was Nancy’s lively interest in people that was largely responsible for involving her in unusual adventures, and she was always on the alert for a new mystery.

Bess eyed her perfume package longingly and finally ripped off the paper. “I can’t stand it any longer.” She sighed. “I must try some of this delicious-smelling stuff!” She opened the bottle and dabbed a couple of drops behind each ear. Then she offered it to George. “Try some. It’s really lovely—makes me think I’m in the mystic Orient.”

George could not keep from making a face. “No *thank* you!” she replied firmly. “It’s not my type!”

Nancy and Bess laughed. Then Bess offered some to Nancy, who accepted willingly. Bess again took out the stopper and was leaning over to put some perfume on Nancy when the train lurched and jogged her arm.

“Oh!” Bess cried in horror. The perfume sprayed over Nancy, as the bottle fell to the floor.

“Such a waste of money!” George muttered as she picked up the half-empty container.

“What a shame!” Nancy exclaimed. “It’s your perfume, Bess, and now I have a lot of it on me.”

Bess groaned. “I should’ve waited till I was home to open the bottle. I’m lucky there’s some left!” Carefully she placed the small vial in her handbag.

By now the concentrated odor of Blue Jade had permeated the car, and passengers in nearby seats flung open the windows.

“I’m glad we’re getting off at the next stop.” Nancy giggled. “Everyone is laughing at us.”

Nancy had become so engrossed with the spilled perfume that she had forgotten about the pale young woman who occupied the opposite seat. Now, as Nancy turned her head, she was startled to see that the girl had slumped down in a dejected heap.

“She’s fainted!” Nancy exclaimed, moving quickly across the aisle.

She shook the girl gently, but there was no response from the frail figure.

“Bess! Ask if there is a doctor in the car!” Nancy cried urgently.

By this time other passengers in the car were aware that something had happened, and were crowding about, asking unnecessary questions and getting in the way. Nancy politely asked them to move back.

There did not appear to be a doctor in the coach, but as Nancy rubbed the girl’s wrists, she was relieved to see that she was showing signs of recovering consciousness.

George quickly raised the window so that the fresh air fanned the girl’s face. Leaning against the seat, she looked deathly pale.

“What can I do?” George asked.

“Stay here while I get some water,” Nancy answered. “She’s coming around now. I think

she'll be all right in a few minutes."

Nancy hurried to the water cooler at the far end of the car. As she was trying to fill the paper cup, a man who had been standing near the doorway came toward her. He made a pretense of waiting his turn to get a drink, yet she realized by the intent look on his face that something had startled him. He was deliberately studying her! Was it because of the perfume? She fairly reeked with it!

Nancy was not prepared, however, for what came next. The man edged closer to her, glanced quickly about to see that no one was close by, and muttered in a guttural tone:

“Any word from the Chief?”

Nancy was taken completely by surprise. She knew she had never seen the man before, for she would not have forgotten such a cruel face. His steel-gray eyes bored straight into her. Nancy was so bewildered she could think of nothing to say.

The stranger realized at once that he had made a mistake. “Excuse me, miss. My error,” he murmured, starting for the car ahead. “But that perfume—Well, never mind!”

CHAPTER II

Mysterious Numbers

NANCY stared after the stranger and wondered what he could have meant.

"Evidently he mistook me for somebody else," she thought. "But even so, his actions certainly were peculiar."

What message had he expected to receive from her? Who was the Chief? How strange that the man should speak of the perfume as though it had been the cause of his mistake!

If Nancy's mind had not been occupied with the frail girl's condition, she might have wondered more over the strange encounter. She dismissed it for the moment. Quickly filling a cup with ice water, she rushed back to George and Bess, who were giving first aid to the girl.

"Do you feel better now?" Nancy asked. "Here, drink this."

"Thank you," the girl murmured, gratefully taking the cup. "I feel much better now," she added quietly. "It was very kind of you to help me."

"It must have been the perfume that made you faint," George declared. "A little is all right, but half a bottle is overpowering."

"I'm sure it wasn't the perfume," the girl returned quickly. "I haven't felt well since I first boarded the train early this morning."

"What a shame," Bess said. "I'll get you some more water." She soon returned with a second cup.

"By the way, Nancy"—Bess turned to her friend—"who was that man who spoke to you at the water cooler?"

"You noticed him?" Nancy asked, surprised.

"Yes," Bess said, "but I didn't recognize him."

"Nor did I," Nancy remarked. "The whole thing was quite mysterious. He simply approached me and said: 'Any word from the Chief?'"

"The Chief!" Bess and George chorused. "What Chief?"

"I have no idea," the young sleuth admitted. "But evidently it was this strange perfume that attracted his attention, or so he said."

"I wonder what the perfume could have to do with it?" Bess looked perplexed.

By this time the train was slowing down as it approached the River Heights station, and Nancy and her friends realized they must hurry or they would miss their stop.

"I'm afraid that we must interrupt this conversation and say good-by," Nancy told the girl reluctantly. "We get off at River Heights."

"River Heights!" The girl glanced anxiously out the window. "I get off here too! I had no idea we were so close."

"We'll help you," Nancy offered. "Do you really feel well enough to walk?"

"Yes, I'm all right now."

George and Bess collected the miscellaneous packages, while Nancy helped the stranger along the aisle. The girl hesitated uncertainly as she stepped from the train.

"I'm not very familiar with River Heights," she said to Nancy. "Which direction should I take to go to the center of town?"

“You’re still too shaky to walk any distance,” George spoke up. “Have you no friend here to meet you?”

The girl shook her head.

“Then why don’t you come home for a snack with us?” Nancy suggested. “I left my car parked here by the station, and I can drive you back.”

The girl started to protest, but Nancy and the others urged her on, and soon they were all settled in Nancy’s blue convertible.

“I haven’t even told you my name,” the strange girl said, leaning back wearily. “I’m Joanne Byrd. I live with my grandmother at Red Gate Farm about ten miles from Round Valley. That’s where I took the train.”

Nancy introduced herself and her friends as she started the car and headed it toward the Drew residence in another section of the city.

“How nice it must be to live on a farm!” Bess remarked. “And Red Gate is such a pleasant-sounding name.”

“Red Gate is a lovely place,” Joanne said feelingly. “I’ve lived there with my grandmother ever since I can remember. We don’t have the money, though, to keep up the farm. That’s why I left home today—to find work here.”

“Do you have something in mind?” Bess questioned.

“I came in response to a particular advertisement,” Joanne replied, but did not say what it was. A faraway look came into her eyes. “We simply must raise enough money to pay the longstanding interest due on the mortgage of our farm or Gram will lose it.”

“Surely no one would be mean enough to take over your farm,” Bess murmured sympathetically.

“A bank holds the mortgage. It has no choice. Gram knows very little about money matters, so she takes anyone’s advice. Years ago she was advised to buy another farm and sell it at a high price. All at once values crashed and she couldn’t meet the payments on her extra farm, so it went back to the original owners. Then she had to put a heavy mortgage on Red Gate, too, and if she loses that, she’ll be penniless.”

As Joanne finished her story, Nancy turned the car into the Drews’ driveway.

“Come in, everybody,” she invited. “Perhaps we can think of a way to help Joanne.”

The three girls followed Nancy into the house, where they were greeted by the Drews’ pleasant housekeeper. Hannah Gruen had been like a mother to Nancy ever since the death of Mrs. Drew when Nancy was a child. Nancy asked Hannah to make some sandwiches for them all, then led the girls to the living room.

“You must be nearly starved,” Nancy said to Joanne a moment later. “I know I am.”

“I am rather hungry,” Joanne confessed. “I haven’t had anything to eat since last night.”

“What!” the other girls chorused.

“It was my own fault,” Joanne said hastily. “I was too excited this morning to think about food.”

“It’s no wonder you fainted,” Nancy said. “I’ll ask Hannah to fix you something hot.”

Nancy returned from the kitchen with a tray of appetizing sandwiches and a bowl of soup. Joanne ate heartily. Nancy and her friends joined in, for they had had only a light snack while on their shopping expedition.

“I do feel better,” Joanne announced when she had finished. “It was so good of you to bring me here.”

“Not at all,” Nancy said softly. “We’d like to help you all we can.”

“Thank you, but I believe everything will work out all right if only I get this position.” Joanne glanced anxiously at the clock. “I’ll really have to go now or I’ll be too late to make the call this afternoon. Could you tell me how to get to this address?”

She handed a folded scrap of newspaper to Nancy. “This particular ad for an office girl caught my eye since it asks for someone who has had experience on a farm.”

Nancy found the advertisement to be rather conventional, but it was the name at the bottom of the paragraph that held her attention.

“Why, this ad says Riverside Heights!” she exclaimed. “You should have stayed on the train until the next stop!”

“I thought Riverside Heights and River Heights were the same place!” Joanne Byrd cried in distressed surprise.

“Riverside Heights is only a few miles away,” Nancy explained, “and the names are confusing even to people who live near here, so it’s a natural mistake.”

“Oh, dear, I don’t know what to do now,” Joanne said anxiously. “If I don’t apply for that position this afternoon, I’ll probably lose my chance of getting it.”

Nancy had taken a liking to the girl and wanted to help her. Not only was Joanne half sick from lack of food, but she had worked herself into a nervous state.

“You must let me drive you to Riverside Heights,” Nancy insisted. “It’ll only take fifteen minutes and you’ll have plenty of time to apply for the position.”

Joanne’s face brightened instantly, but she was reluctant to accept the favor. “I’ve really troubled you enough.”

“Nonsense! We’ll start right away!” Nancy turned to Bess and George. “Want to come along?”

Bess and George both declined, since they were expected home. The cousins gathered up their packages and all the girls went to the car. Nancy dropped Bess and George at their own homes, then took the highway leading to the next city.

“I do hope I get there in time,” Joanne said worriedly. “The job will mean so much to Gram and me!”

“You’ll get there,” Nancy assured her. “Have you ever applied for a job before?”

“No. I’ve always helped Gram run the farm until now,” Joanne explained. “I felt I was more needed there than anywhere else. We keep a farm hand, but a great deal of the work still falls upon me.”

The girls soon reached Riverside Heights, and Nancy had no trouble finding the address mentioned in the advertisement. It was in a run-down section of the city, but Nancy did not mention this to her companion.

“Here we are,” Nancy said cheerfully, stopping the car in front of a dingy-looking office building.

Joanne made no move to get out of the car, but sat nervously pressing her hands together.

“I’m a terrible coward,” she confessed. “I don’t know what in the world to say when I go in. I wish you’d come with me.”

“I’ll be glad to,” said Nancy, as she turned off the ignition and locked the car. They entered the building. There was no elevator, so the girls climbed the dimly lighted stairway to the third floor. Soon they came to Room 305, which had been mentioned in the advertisement.

“There’s no name on the door,” Nancy observed, “but this must be the right place.”

As they stepped into the reception room, Nancy noted that it was dirty and drab. The two girls glanced at each other, exchanging expressions of disappointment.

At that moment a man came from the inner office and surveyed the girls sharply. He was tall and wiry, with hostile, penetrating eyes and harsh features. His suit was bold in pattern and color, and his necktie was gaudy.

“Well?” he demanded coldly.

Joanne found sufficient courage to take the advertisement from her pocket.

"I—I saw this in the paper," she stammered. "I came to apply for the position."

The man stared at Joanne critically, then at Nancy.

"You lookin' for the job too?" he asked.

Nancy shook her head. "No. I'm here with my friend."

The man looked at Joanne again and said with a shrug of his shoulders, "Go on in the other room. I'll talk to you in a minute."

Joanne cast Nancy a doubtful glance and obediently stepped into the inner office.

"Look here," the man addressed Nancy, "wouldn't you like that job? I could use a good-lookin' girl like you."

"I'm not looking for work, thank you," Nancy returned aloofly.

The man was about to make a retort when the telephone rang. He scowled and went over to the table to answer it. As he lifted the receiver he looked nervously back toward Nancy.

"Hello," he growled into the phone. "This is Al. Shoot!"

Nancy listened to his end of the unbusinesslike conversation and watched him reach for paper and pencil and begin to scribble down a line of figures. This in itself would not have seemed so peculiar, except that he continued to eye Nancy suspiciously.

He kept on copying figures. All the while Nancy watched him curiously.

"O.K., Hank," he muttered just before he hung up. "You say you've found a girl? ... Fine! We can't be too careful in this business!"

All this time Nancy was wondering what kind of transactions went on in this office. There had been no indication on the door of what business the man was engaged in and nothing in the room gave her any clue. She realized now that Joanne's chances of getting the position were slim, and Nancy was actually relieved. She was very suspicious of the whole setup.

"I was just taking down some stock-market quotations," the man remarked lightly as he crossed the room toward Nancy.

"This isn't an investment house, is it?" she asked.

"No, you wouldn't call it that exactly," he answered with a smirk. "We run a manufacturing business."

"I see," Nancy murmured, though she really did not understand at all. "What do you manufacture?"

The man pretended not to hear and moved on to the inner office where Joanne was waiting. In haste to escape further questions, he forgot to pick up the sheet of paper with the numbers on it.

Nancy was curious about the telephone conversation and could not resist the temptation to take a peek at the notation. She stepped silently over to the telephone table and glanced at the sheet. Strung out across the top and bottom of the page were numbers. The top row read:

1653 112 129 1562 16 882 091 5618

"Stock quotations, like fun!" Nancy told herself. "Why did he lie about it? He must have been afraid I'd discover something!" As usual, Nancy was intrigued at any hint of a mystery. She studied the row of odd figures. Suddenly it dawned on her that they might be a message in code!

Nancy looked quickly toward the inner office. The door was open, but the man sat with his back toward her. She did not dare pick up the paper. If only there was enough time to copy the code!

With one eye on the office, Nancy took a sheet of paper and frantically scribbled the numbers, carefully keeping them in their right order. She could hear Joanne's soft voice, then her prospective employer talking loudly, and realized the interview was coming to an end.

She had copied only the top row of numbers, but dared not spend any more time at it. She put the copy into her bag and slipped back into her chair just a moment before Joanne and

the man emerged from the inner room. He glanced toward the telephone, gave a start, and rushed across the room. With a muttered exclamation he grabbed the paper and thrust it into his pocket.

Nancy's heart was beating madly as she forced herself to remain outwardly calm. He stood with a cold look on his face, his eyes fixed on Nancy.

CHAPTER III

Work on a Code

HAD the man heard her rush from the telephone table? Nancy wondered. Was he suspicious of her actions during his absence? If so, what reason did he have and what business deal was he hiding in this dingy excuse for an office? Nancy pretended not to notice his penetrating, questioning eyes, but she was ill at ease.

The hostile man spoke up. “You girls better get out of here!” he blurted. “I got no more time to waste. And don’t bother to come back!”

Nancy and Joanne looked hastily at each other and moved toward the door. Once outside the building, Nancy breathed a sigh of relief and turned toward Joanne, who was close to tears.

“Don’t feel bad because you didn’t get the job,” Nancy said gently as they walked to the car. “You wouldn’t have wanted it, I’m sure.”

“That man was detestable!” Joanne shuddered. “I had just given my name and address when he started to shout. You must have heard him.”

Nancy nodded. “I think he had already found another girl to work for him,” she said. “At least I heard him say something like that over the phone.”

“I knew I wouldn’t get the job.” Joanne sighed dejectedly. “He told me I wasn’t the type!”

“I’d count my blessings if I were you,” said Nancy soberly. “There’s something strange going on in that office and I’d like to know what it is.”

“Why, what do you mean?” Joanne asked quizzically.

“Well,” Nancy began carefully, “I’m not sure my suspicions are just, but I have a hunch there’s something shady about the telephone message he got when you were in the inner office.” Nancy explained about the series of numbers on the sheet of paper and how she suspected they might form some sort of code.

“At any rate,” Nancy went on, “we can’t be sure of anything, so this must remain confidential.”

Joanne nodded and fell silent.

Many thoughts raced through Nancy’s mind as she remembered the day’s encounters. First there had been the perfume shop and its mysterious saleswoman, then the curious man on the train who had been attracted by the strange fragrance. And now, this crude, gruff man in Room 305!

“What should I do now?” Joanne asked forlornly. “I can’t go back to Red Gate Farm and let Gram down. I simply must find work!”

“Why not come home with me?” Nancy suggested as they paused beside her car. “I’ll be glad to have you as my guest for the night, and in the morning you’ll feel better and can decide what to do then.”

Joanne shook her head proudly. “Thank you, but I wouldn’t think of letting you go to any more trouble. I have a little money. I can find a boardinghouse and I’ll keep on looking for work here.”

Nancy saw that Joanne was disappointed and discouraged and hated to leave her on her own, but finally conceded. “I guess you’re right,” she admitted. “But at least let me help you hunt for a place to stay.” Joanne accepted the offer gratefully.

Even with the car, it was difficult to locate a pleasant room. Joanne could not afford a high-priced place, and the cheaper ones were unsatisfactory. Finally, however, they found a suitable room on a quiet street and Nancy helped Joanne get settled.

"I may be driving over this way tomorrow," she said. "If I do, I'll stop in to see what luck you've had."

"I wish you would," Joanne invited shyly. "I'll need someone to bolster my morale."

"All right, I will," Nancy promised.

After a few words of encouragement she said good-by, then drove slowly toward River Heights, her mind again focused on the various events of the day.

"I don't know what will happen to Joanne if she doesn't find work," Nancy told herself. "It would be a shame if her grandmother loses Red Gate Farm. I wish I could do something, but I don't know of any available jobs."

It was nearly dinnertime when Nancy reached River Heights. As she passed the Fayne home, she saw George and her cousin Bess on the front lawn and stopped to tell them about Joanne's unsuccessful interview.

"Isn't that too bad?" Bess murmured in disappointment. "She seems such a sweet girl. I'd like to know her better."

"I promised I'd drive over to see her tomorrow," Nancy told the girls. "Why don't you come along?"

"Let's!" George cried enthusiastically. "I love going places with you. We always seem to find some sort of adventure!"

Nancy's blue eyes became serious. "I'd say this has been a pretty full day! I can't seem to forget that mysterious saleswoman in the Oriental perfume shop or the strange man on the train. I wasn't going to say anything to you about this, but something odd happened this afternoon in that office."

Nancy then related the mysterious actions and behavior of the man named "Al."

"You mean you think his telephone conversation was a little on the shady side?" Bess asked, wide-eyed.

"It seemed that way to me," Nancy answered. "I doubt very much that it's a manufacturing business and those numbers I copied from his pad were anything but stock-market quotations!"

"Well, here we go again! Never a dull moment with Nancy around!" George laughed gaily.

"Don't be too impatient, George," Nancy advised with a grin. "We don't have proof that any of today's incidents is really cause for suspicion."

At this moment a foreign-make car went by. Nancy glanced casually at the driver, then gave a start. He was the man who had spoken to her on the train!

He slowed down and stared at the three girls and at the Fayne home. Nancy felt at once that he was memorizing the address. He gave a self-satisfied smile and drove on. Nancy noted his license number.

"I almost feel as if I'll hear from him again," she told herself, then revealed to the girls, who had not noticed the car's driver, that he was the man who had confronted her on the train.

"He's still interested in you," Bess teased.

But George found nothing to laugh about. "I don't like this, Nancy," she said seriously. "I remember he had a hard, calculating face."

Nancy, too, remained serious. A disturbing thought had suddenly occurred to her.

"Why," she told herself, "that man must have been trailing me. But I wonder for what reason?"

She determined, for the moment at least, not to mention her suspicions aloud and dropped the subject of the mysterious man. Presently she bade Bess and George good-by, climbed into her convertible, and drove home.

“I think I’ll ask Dad what he thinks about that man Al’s mysterious telephone message,” Nancy decided as she hopped from the car.

She had often taken some of her puzzling problems to her father. He, in turn, frequently discussed his law cases with his daughter and found Nancy’s suggestions practical.

“You look tired, dear,” Carson Drew observed as she entered the living room and sank into a comfortable chair. “Have a big day shopping?”

“I can’t remember when so much ever happened to me in one day.” Nancy smiled despite her fatigue.

“I suppose I’ll be getting the bills in a few days,” her father remarked teasingly.

“It wasn’t just the shopping, Dad,” Nancy returned gravely.

Nancy now plunged into the story of the Oriental shop and the dropped perfume bottle, of her encounter with the stranger on the train, and the strange fact of having seen him a short while ago in a foreign-make car.

“What do you make of it?” she questioned.

Mr. Drew shrugged. “What did he look like?”

“The man seemed very polite, but he had a cruel look in his eyes.” Nancy gave a brief description of him.

“Hm,” Mr. Drew mused, “I can’t say I like the sound of this.”

“I wouldn’t wonder about it,” said Nancy, “except that the girl in the shop seemed so reluctant to sell the perfume. Why do you suppose she cared whether someone bought it?”

“Maybe she was instructed to save it for special customers,” Mr. Drew suggested.

“Dad, you may have something there!” Nancy exclaimed.

She told her father about Joanne Byrd and described the office which they had visited together. She ended by showing him the figures which she had copied.

“This was almost all of the message,” she explained. “I didn’t have time to copy the rest. Can you figure it out?”

Carson Drew studied the sheet of paper. “I’m not an expert on codes,” he said finally, “but I suspect this might be one, since the man lied in saying these figures are market quotations.”

“Can you decipher it?” Nancy asked eagerly.

“I wish I could, but it looks like a complicated one. It would probably take me days to figure out what these numbers stand for. Why don’t you work on it yourself?”

“I don’t know too much about codes,” Nancy declared, “but perhaps I can learn!”

“I have a book you might use,” her father offered. “It may not help much, since every code is different. Still, all codes have some features in common. For instance, in any language certain words are repeated more frequently than others. If you can figure out a frequency table, then look for certain numbers to appear more often than others, you may get somewhere.”

“I’d like to try,” Nancy said eagerly.

“This will be a good test for your sleuthing mind,” her father said teasingly. “If you don’t figure out the code, you can always turn this paper over to an expert.”

“Not until I’ve had a fighting chance at it myself,” Nancy answered with spirit.

“I’d really like to help you with this mystery,” her father said, “but I’m so tied up with this Clifton case I just can’t tackle anything else right now.”

Immediately after dinner Mr. Drew retired to his second-floor study to work on his law case. Nancy went to her bedroom to read the book on codes. When she finished, the girl detective took out the sheet on which she had copied the numbers and studied the figures intently.

“I’m sure the numbers stand for letters of the alphabet,” Nancy told herself. “They must

have been arranged in some pattern."

For over two hours Nancy tried combination after combination and applied it to the code. Nothing showed up until she hit upon the plan of four letters of the alphabet in sequence by number, the next four in reverse. Alternating in this manner and leaving two in the end bracket, Nancy scrutinized what she had worked out:

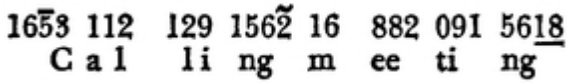
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
1	2	3	4	8	7	6	5	9	10	11	12	16

N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
15	14	13	17	18	19	20	24	23	22	21	25	26

"I've hit it!" she thought excitedly.

CHAPTER IV

A Switch in Jobs



The numbers with the marks above or below them stymied Nancy completely. Most of the others fell neatly into place and spelled:

"Calling meeting," Nancy repeated. "But where? And by whom?" She yawned, weary from her long concentration. "My brain's too fogged to figure out anything more," she told herself. "I'll tackle this another time."

The next morning Nancy and her father enjoyed a leisurely breakfast. He praised her for hitting upon the key to the code but agreed that solving the rest of it would be difficult.

"Keep at it," he advised, smiling fondly at his daughter. "By the way, I won't be home to lunch or dinner today because of this Clifton case."

"I thought I'd visit Joanne and try to cheer her up," Nancy said. "Do you, by any chance, know anyone who's looking for an office girl?" she added.

Mr. Drew shook his head. "No. I'm afraid I don't. But if I hear of anything I'll let you know."

"I feel that Joanne isn't the type to be in the hectic business world," Nancy remarked. "If it weren't that she wants to help her grandmother, I doubt that she'd even try for a city position."

After Carson Drew had left for his office, Nancy busied herself around the house, helping Hannah. When the housework was finally done, Nancy settled herself in an easy chair and delved into the code book once more. But she found no new hints to help break her own set of numben.

Nancy, Bess, and George had planned to start for Riverside Heights early in the afternoon, so as soon as the luncheon dishes had been cleared away, Nancy was off to pick up the other girls. By two-thirty they had reached Joanne's rooming house.

The landlady answered Nancy's knock on the front door and informed her that Joanne had left two hours before to see about a job. She would be back at three o'clock. The woman invited the girls in, but the living room looked so dark and dreary that they preferred to wait outside in the car.

"It's too bad Joanne has to stay in a dismal place like that," Nancy remarked, "especially when she's accustomed to farm life."

"I sure hope she finds something," Bess added. "Maybe luck will be with her today."

Within fifteen minutes the girls spotted Joanne at a distance. She did not notice the car, and unaware that she was being observed, walked slowly toward the rooming house, her head drooping dejectedly.

"She didn't get the job," George murmured. "I feel so sorry for her."

As Joanne approached, Nancy called to her. Joanne glanced up quickly and mustered a smile.

"No luck today?" Bess questioned.

"None at all," Joanne answered with a sigh. She came over to the car and stood leaning against the door. "I tried half a dozen places, but I couldn't land a thing. I'll just have to try again tomorrow."

In the face of such spirit on Joanne's part, the girls could do nothing but encourage her, though secretly they feared she would have no better luck the next day.

"How about coming for a short ride?" Nancy invited.

"I'd love it," Joanne accepted eagerly. "It's so hot and stuffy in my room—" She hesitated, then added, "Of course, I guess it is everywhere these days!"

Nancy took a road that led out of the city and soon they were driving past cultivated fields of corn and wheat. Gradually, Joanne became more cheerful.

"It's so good to be out in the country again!" she declared, gazing wistfully toward a farmhouse nestled in the rolling hills. "That place looks something like Red Gate Farm, only not half so attractive. I wish you all could visit me there sometime!"

"So do wel" Nancy said enthusiastically. "Wouldn't it be wonderful to hike over hills and breathe in the fresh clean air?"

"I've always wanted to spend a vacation on a farm," Bess declared longingly. "Just imagine having cream an inch thick!"

"Just what you need for reducing!" her cousin teased her.

"You wouldn't have to worry about that." Joanne smiled. "We keep only one cow."

When the girls later left Joanne at the door of her boardinghouse, they had the satisfaction of knowing she was in a more cheerful frame of mind.

"We'll keep in touch with you, Joanne," Nancy promised as they said good-by.

"I have a feeling we'll be seeing a lot more of each other," Joanne called after them. "So please do call me Jo! I'd much prefer it."

"Jo it is!" they agreed merrily. "Good-by for now."

Nancy and her friends had just started back to River Heights when Nancy checked her gas gauge and decided to stop at a filling station. The girls were idly watching passers-by when suddenly a young woman, walking with mincing steps because of her extremely high heels, attracted Nancy's attention. Nancy gasped in recognition.

There was no mistaking the distinctive Oriental features. The clerk in the perfume shop!

Nancy turned to her companions. "Look at that girl who just crossed over. Isn't she the same one who sold you the perfume, Bess?"

"You mean the one who tried not to sell me the perfume, don't you?" Bess joked. "Yes, she's the same girl!"

Their eyes followed the girl up the street. She had not glanced toward them, but had passed the filling station and continued on.

"Now, what can she be doing here?" Nancy wondered. She got out of the car and stood watching the girl, who entered an office building a short distance farther up the street.

"That's funny," Nancy said to her friends, who were peering from the car windows. "I think that's the very place where Jo applied for a position!"

"You don't suppose that perfume girl has two jobs, do you?" George questioned.

"I'd sure like to find out," the young detective answered.

Just then the attendant approached. Nancy paid him and stepped back into the car.

"We must try to follow her," she declared, starting the motor. They pulled up near the office building into which the young woman had disappeared.

“You two wait here and keep watch,” Nancy said. “If I’m not back in a few minutes, you’d better come and see what’s going on.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” George said mockingly. “We’re at your service! But be careful!”

Nancy alighted, hurried up the street, and went into the building. The halls were deserted. Evidently the girl had gone into one of the offices. But which one? As Nancy stood uncertainly staring up and down, she spotted a handyman coming down the corridor.

“Did you see a girl come into the building just a moment ago?” she inquired.

“Oriental?” the man demanded, resting on his broom.

Nancy nodded eagerly. “Yes, she looks rather Oriental.”

“Oh, you mean Yvonne Wong.”

“Do you know her?” Nancy said, thinking that with the name Yvonne, the girl was probably part French.

“No, but I heard that man she works for, with the loud voice and the swell clothes, call her by that name.”

“She works here?” Nancy inquired in surprise.

“Guess so. She must be a new girl. Came here yesterday.”

“I see,” Nancy murmured, thinking Yvonne Wong had managed a rather sudden change of jobs. “Could you tell me in which office she works?”

Her questions evidently had begun to annoy the handyman. “In 305. If you’re so interested,” he said brusquely, “why don’t you go in and ask her what you want to know?”

“Thank you,” Nancy responded with a polite smile, turning away. “I won’t trouble you any further.”

Nancy had taken only a few steps when she thought of one more question and came back. “By the way,” she said in a casual tone, “what sort of office is 305?”

The man regarded her suspiciously. “How should I know?” he demanded bluntly. “They don’t pay me to go stickin’ my nose in other folks’ business. I got my own work.”

Nancy could see that she was not going to learn any more from the man, so she left the building and joined Bess and George, who were waiting anxiously at the door.

“Well, what did you manage to find out?” Bess queried, as the three girls walked toward the car.

“Quite a bit,” Nancy answered meditatively. She was certain that she could not have been mistaken. Yvonne Wong was the same girl who only yesterday had waited on them in the Oriental shop. Why had she changed positions?

“Well,” George broke into her thoughts, “don’t keep us in suspense!”

Nancy answered all their questions as she drove toward River Heights, explaining that the young woman’s name was Yvonne Wong and that she was a new girl in the office—the same office Nancy and Joanne had visited.

“But what about Yvonne’s job at the Oriental perfume shop?” asked George.

“I don’t know,” Nancy admitted, “and the handyman wouldn’t give me any indication as to the type of business it was!”

Nancy recalled the strange telephone call which had been made while she and Joanne were in the office. She distinctly remembered that some mention had been made of a girl who had been found for the position, and that the man who called himself “Al” had said that one “couldn’t be too careful.”

“I wouldn’t be so suspicious about Yvonne,” Nancy added, “except I have a feeling she didn’t get that job by chance. She must have been chosen because she was especially suited to the situation—whatever that is.”

“There’s something underhanded about the whole thing, but we haven’t much to go on,” Bess declared.

Nancy agreed. “Some clue may turn up. Anyway, we have Jo to think about for the time being.”

It was getting dark as Nancy dropped off Bess and then George at their homes.

It rained so hard the following day that Nancy stayed indoors and tried to figure out the remaining symbols of the code. Using the same alphabetical key, 16 was M, 5 equaled H, 2 could be B, and 18 stood for R.

“MHBR,” Nancy pondered. “That doesn’t make any sense. Perhaps those marks over and under the letters are a second code,” she reasoned. “If only I could decipher them, I might know who’s calling what meeting, and where.”

The next morning a bright sun shone. While Nancy was busy with chores around the house, the phone rang and she went to answer it.

“Hello, Nancy,” said a quiet voice. “This is Jo. How are you?”

“Oh, Jo, I’m fine,” Nancy replied eagerly. “Did you find a job?” she asked hopefully.

“Not yet,” Joanne answered sadly. “But I have some other news.”

“I hope it’s good,” Nancy said.

“I just talked with my grandmother on the phone. I must go home right away. She told me that soon after I left, a man called and made an offer to buy Red Gate. His price was so low, she didn’t accept. He was very persistent, though, and gave her five days to think it over.”

“Yes?” Nancy prompted.

“Well,” the other girl went on, “in the meantime, Grandmother decided to try raising money by taking in boarders. She placed an ad in the paper that same day.”

“Good for her!” Nancy exclaimed. “Has she had any replies?”

“No,” Joanne said worriedly. “Even though the ad hasn’t run very long, Gram’s discouraged. I’m afraid she has changed her mind and intends to take that man’s offer. She said he’s coming to Red Gate tomorrow at five o’clock and bringing papers for her to sign.”

There was a pause, then Joanne burst out, “Nancy, I just can’t let Gram go through with this, and if I’m not there, she’ll accept the man’s offer. She mustn’t give up Red Gate Farm yet! That’s why I must get home and persuade her not to sell.”

“By all means,” Nancy agreed. “I suppose you’ll take the train to Round Valley in the morning?”

“That’s the horrible part, Nancy,” Joanne said dejectedly. “I’ll have only enough money for train fare half the way after I pay my room rent.”

“No need to do that, Jo,” Nancy said eagerly. “You get your bag packed and be ready to leave at ten o’clock tomorrow morning!”

CHAPTER V

Money, Money !

As NANCY reflected on her plan, another idea occurred to her. She was sure that Bess and George would love the chance to spend a vacation on a farm, since they had both mentioned it the other day. Nancy did some mental arithmetic and came to the conclusion that three steady boarders who paid their bills regularly might help to lessen the amount of the mortgage interest payments that threatened Red Gate.

"And also keep Mrs. Byrd from selling the place," Nancy thought. "I hope Dad agrees to my making the trip."

That evening at dinner Mr. Drew said, "I'll be out of town for a week or so, Nancy. Do you think you can get some of your friends to stay with you?"

"I have an even better idea," Nancy replied, and smiled.

She outlined her plan to help Joanne Byrd. Her father consented enthusiastically, proud as always of Nancy's desire to assist others.

It was not so easy to convince Bess and George, when Nancy telephoned them. They both wanted to help Joanne and agreed that a week or two in the country would be very pleasant, but there were complications. If George went, it meant she would lose out on a camping trip. Bess had planned to visit an aunt in Chicago, but admitted that the trip could be postponed.

"There's one thing about it," George said laughingly as she finally agreed to give up the camping trip. "I've never been with you yet that we didn't run into an adventure or mystery! Maybe a trip to Red Gate will be exciting."

Bess and George had no trouble in getting their parents' consent. It was decided that Nancy would pick up Joanne first, then come back for the cousins, since River Heights was on the way to Round Valley.

Nancy packed her clothes that night after telephoning the plans to Joanne. As she was dosing the suitcase, her eyes fell upon the copy of the coded message which lay on the dressing table.

"I'd better take it along and work on it whenever I have the chance," she decided.

Nancy got up early the next morning and had breakfast with her father. After exchanging fond good-bys with him and Hannah, she hurried to her car.

It was close to ten o'clock when Nancy reached Riverside Heights. She stopped at a downtown service station and had her convertible filled with gas and checked for oiL Then she drove to Joanne's boardinghouse.

Her passenger was waiting. Nancy was glad to find that Joanne seemed to be in better spirits.

"It'll be such fun, all of us going together," Joanne said, "and I know Gram will be happy to have you stay as long as you like."

"Only on the condition that we are paying guests," Nancy insisted.

"We'll see about that later," Joanne said, smiling.

They put her suitcase into the trunk of the car and soon were on their way back to River Heights. Assured by Joanne that they would be welcome at Red Gate, the cousins brought out their suitcases and put them in the luggage compartment.

George took Nancy aside and said excitedly, "A little while ago a man phoned here and

asked for Miss Fayne. When I answered, he said, 'Listen, miss, tell that snoopy friend of yours to stop her snooping, or she'll be sorry!' Then he hung up without giving his name."

Nancy set her jaw, then smiled. "Whoever he is, he has a guilty conscience. So my suspicions were well founded."

"Who do you think he is?" George asked.

"Either the strange man on the train who followed me here, or some accomplice of his."

"I'm glad for your sake we're going away, Nancy," stated George.

"Let's not say anything about this to Jo," Nancy advised, as she and George walked back to the car.

"It's a perfect day for our trip to the country," Joanne said excitedly.

George could see by the expression on Joanne's face that a visit to Red Gate Farm with her new friends was far more important to her than any other plans the girls might have had.

"I agree one hundred per cent!" George answered happily as she stepped into the car.

"And I'll be so glad to get out of this heat," Bess chimed in with a sigh. "I spent practically the whole night dreaming about the cool, refreshing breezes in the country."

As Nancy steered the convertible in the direction of Round Valley, she said with an eager smile, "We're off to rescue Red Gate Farm!"

Nancy and her friends thoroughly enjoyed the scenic route to Round Valley. They stopped for a quick lunch and then continued their drive. The winding roads led through cool groves and skirted sparkling little lakes. Each hilltop brought a different and beautiful view.

Gradually the worried expression completely left Joanne's eyes, and color came into her thin face. She began to laugh heartily at the antics of Bess and George. As they rode along she told the girls a great deal about her home.

"You'll like Red Gate, I'm sure," she said enthusiastically. "We haven't any riding horses, but there will be plenty of other things to do. We can explore the cave, for one thing."

"Cave?" Bess questioned with interest. "How exciting! What kind is it? A home for bears or a pirate's den?"

Joanne laughed. "There's a large cavern located on the farm. No one knows how it came to be there, but we think it must have been made a long time ago by an underground river."

"You must have explored it before this!" Nancy exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, of course, though I'll admit I never did very thoroughly, and I haven't been near the cave for years. As a child I was always afraid of the place—it looked so dark and gloomy. Lately I've been too busy working around the farm."

"We'll have to put that at the top of our list!" George declared. "I love spooky things."

"Well, I'm not so sure *I* do," Bess admitted.

Nancy laughed. "We may even find hidden treasure in the walls."

"I wish you could." Joanne sighed. "It certainly would come in handy."

The hours passed quickly as the travelers alternately sang and chatted. "Why, it's almost four o'clock!" George announced in surprise.

"We've made good time," Nancy remarked.

Bess spoke up plaintively. "I'm half-starved. It's been ages since lunch. I could go for a gooey sundae."

The others laughed, but agreed they were hungry too.

"Let's watch for a roadside stand," Nancy proposed. "I'll have to stop soon for gas, anyway."

"We'll come to one soon," Joanne spoke up. "We're in Round Valley now."

A few minutes later she pointed out a combination filling station and lunchroom which looked clean and inviting. Nancy turned the convertible into the driveway and parked out of

the way of other drivers who might want to stop for gasoline.

The group entered the lunchroom and took seats at one of the small white tables. They all decided on chocolate nut sundaes topped with whipped cream.

“Here goes another pound.” Bess sighed as she gave her order. “But I’d rather be pleasantly plump than give up sundaes!”

Though there were few customers in the room, the woman in charge, who also did the serving, was extremely slow in filling the orders. Twice Nancy glanced at her watch.

“If you’ll excuse me,” she said, “I’ll step outside and get the gasoline. It will save us a little time in getting started. Don’t wait for me if our sundaes come.”

She drove the car over to the pump and asked the attendant to fill the tank. Before he could do so, however, a large, high-powered sedan pulled up to the other pump, coming to an abrupt stop almost parallel to Nancy’s car.

“Give me five and make it snappy!” a voice called out impatiently.

The attendant glanced inquiringly at Nancy Drew. “Do you mind?” he asked.

“Wait on them first if you like,” she said graciously.

Nancy observed the passengers with interest. There were three rather coarse-looking men, accompanied by a woman.

Nancy could not see the face of the driver, for it was turned away from her. But suddenly he opened the door of his car.

“I’m goin’ inside and get a couple bottles of ginger ale,” she heard him grumble to his companions.

As he stepped from the automobile and turned, Nancy saw his face. He was the mysterious man who had spoken to her that day on the train!

In view of the telephone call George had received, Nancy did not wish to be observed. She turned her head quickly, leaned down, and pretended to be studying a road map. “I hope he doesn’t recognize me!” Nancy thought, “or see my license plate!”

To her relief, the man walked in front of the convertible without a sideward glance. At that moment the woman alighted and walked toward the lunchroom, passing close to Nancy’s car. She was tall and slender, with blond hair that was almost shoulder length. Nancy’s attention was suddenly arrested when she detected on the stranger a familiar scent—Blue Jade perfume!

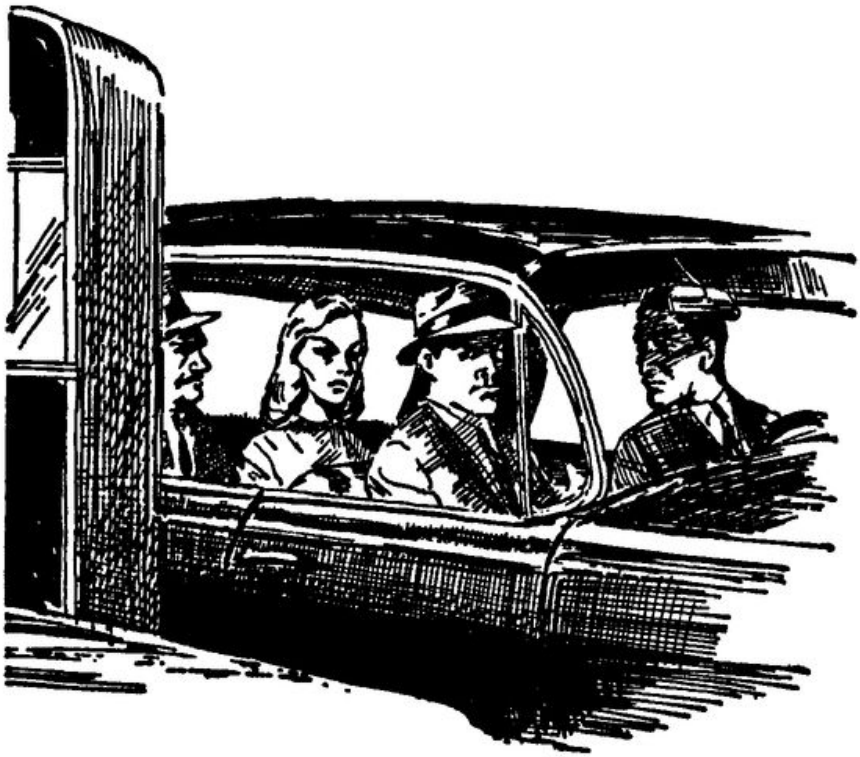
After the driver and the blond woman had entered the lunchroom, Nancy gazed at the two men who remained in the automobile. They were the sort Carson Drew would describe as “tough customers.”

The blond woman soon reappeared and got back into the sedan. Then the driver came out carrying the cold drinks. Without looking in Nancy’s direction, he addressed the attendant harshly.

“Say, ain’t you finished yet?”

He turned to one of the men in the car and handed him the bottles of ginger ale.

“Hold these, will you, Hank? I got to pay this bird!”



Nancy started. “That man in Room 305 called one of his friends ‘Hank’ over the telephone,” she said to herself. “Could he be this person?”

Her attention was drawn back to the driver, who was paying the attendant. He took a thick roll of bills from his pocket, and with a careless gesture peeled off a ten-dollar bill.

“Aren’t you afraid to carry such a wad around, sir?” the attendant questioned, gazing admiringly at the thick roll.

The driver laughed boisterously. “Plenty more where this comes from. Eh, Hank?”

“You bet! My roll makes his look like a flat tire! Just feast your eyes on this!” He flashed an even larger roll of bills in the amazed attendant’s face.

The filling-station man shrugged. “I’ll have to go inside to get, your change.”

The moment he had disappeared, the third man in the car muttered to his companions, “You fools! Do you want to make him suspicious? Pipe down!” He spoke in a low tone but the wind carried his voice in Nancy’s direction.

“Maurice is right,” the driver admitted. “The fellow is only a cornball, but we can’t be too careful.”

The attendant returned with the change. The driver pocketed it and drove off without another word. Nancy instinctively noted the license number of the car. On impulse she went to a phone booth and dialed her friend Chief McGinnis of the River Heights Police Department.

“I’ll ask him to let me know who owns both the sedan and the foreign-make car that slowed down at George’s house,” she determined. “Then I’ll find out about the driver, the woman wearing the Blue Jade, the men named Maurice and Hank, and maybe the man in Room 3051”

CHAPTER VI

A Worrisome Journey

"SOME class, eh?" the attendant remarked to Nancy as she came back to her car. "Must be millionaires."

"Or racketeers," Nancy thought. As soon as her gas tank was filled, she paid the bill and hurried back into the lunchroom. The girls already had been served.

"What took you so long?" Bess asked.

"Another car drove up and I had to wait," Nancy answered simply. She sat down, thoughtfully eating her sundae.

"What's the matter with you?" George de· manded presently. "You've hardly said a word since you sat down."

Nancy looked around and saw that no one was seated near their table. In whispers she told what had happened.

"Oh, dear," said Bess, "maybe that man on the train found out where we're going and is on his way there too!"

"Don't be silly," George chided her cousin. "If he's in some shady deal around River Heights, he'd be glad to have our young sleuth out of the way."

Joanne looked a bit worried, but all she said was, "I think we'd better be on our way. I have to be there before that man comes to buy the farm. I must talk Gram out of it!"

The girls finished the sundaes and picked up their checks, but Nancy insisted upon paying.

"I want to break this twenty-dollar bill Dad gave me," she said. "I've spent most of my smaller bills."

The waitress changed the bill for her without comment and the girls left the lunchroom. As they climbed into the car, Nancy glanced anxiously at the sky. There was a dark overcast in the west.

"It does look like rain over my way," Joanne observed. "And we leave the paved road and take a dirt one about five miles from the farm."

"I'm afraid it's going to be a race against time," Nancy warned, starting the car. "A bad storm on a dirt road won't help matters at all!"

The girls now noticed a change in the country-side. The hills had become steeper and the valleys deeper. The farms dotting the landscape were very attractive.

Nancy made fast time, for she was bent on beating the storm. The sky became gloomier and overcast. Soon the first raindrops appeared on the windshield. "We're in for a downpour all right!" Nancy declared grimly, as she turned onto the dirt road.

Soon there was thunder and lightning, and the rain came down in torrents.

"Listen to that wind!" Bess exclaimed. "It's enough to blow us off the road!"

The next minute everyone groaned in dismay, and Nancy braked the car. Across the road stood a wooden blockade. On it was a sign:

DETOUR
BRIDGE UNDER REPAIR

George read it aloud in disgust. An arrow on the sign indicated a narrow road to the right. As Nancy made the turn, Joanne gave a sigh.

“Oh, dear,” she said, “this back way will take us much longer to reach Red Gate.”

The detour led through a woodland of tall trees. Daylight had been blotted out entirely, and even with the car’s headlights on full, Nancy could barely see ahead. Again she was forced to slow down.

Suddenly a jagged streak of lightning hit a big oak a short distance from the car. It splintered the tree.

“Oh!” screamed Bess. “‘This is terrible!”

Nancy pretended to be calm, but she really was very much worried. She decided it would be safer to get away from the dangerous line of trees, any one of which might crash down on them!

“How long is this stretch of woods?” she asked Joanne.

“Oh, perhaps five hundred feet.”

“We’ll have to chance it.” Nancy drove as quickly as she dared in the darkness. The girls breathed sighs of relief when open country was reached.

But Joanne’s fears were not yet over. “Watch out!” she advised. “There’s a sharp, treacherous curve very soon, just before we take the turnoff for the farm.”

By now the brief storm had moved off to a distant sky and it was easier to see the boundaries of the slippery road. Nancy rounded a curve, but as the car took the turn, the wheels on the right side sank into the thick mud of a ditch, bringing the car to a lurching halt.

The unexpected mishap stunned the girls for a moment. Finally Bess found her voice. “Now what?”

Nancy endeavored to drive the car out of the ditch, but it was useless. “Well”—she sighed —“we may as well jump out and examine the car. Keep your fingers crossed.”

They found the convertible at a lopsided angle. The right wheels, however, were firmly anchored by the mud. The four girls attempted to push the car, but without success.

“I’ll look in the trunk,” Nancy said, “to see if there’s something to help us.”

Nancy found two pieces of heavy burlap. Bess and George put them in front of the two back wheels for traction. Then they gathered and broke up some brush to make a mat for each tire.

“I hope this works,” Joanne said, taking her place to assist in pushing the car. “There probably won’t be anyone else using this desolate road who could help us. ”I—I’m afraid we won’t reach the farm in time!”

Nancy stepped into the car and started the motor, easing the gas and slowly rocking the convertible back and forth. Inch by inch the tires crept forward, finally catching on the burlap and brush and rolling out of the ditch.

“We’ve done it!” Bess shouted proudly.

“With a little outside help!” George panted with a grin. The girls laughed from sheer relief.

They started off again, more slowly than before. But they had gone only a mile when a new storm seemed to be coming up. In less than five minutes complete darkness descended again, bringing another deluge of rain. Deafening thunderclaps instantly followed vivid forks of lightning.

Of necessity, Nancy once more kept the automobile at a snail’s pace. It was impossible to see more than a few feet ahead. Anxiously Joanne kept glancing at her watch. “It’s five-fifteen,” she announced nervously.

Nancy tried to assuage the worried girl’s fears. “This storm may have delayed your grandmother’s caller.”

The wind and rain continued unabated. As the convertible climbed the brow of a hill, there was a brilliant flash of lightning. George, who was seated in front with Nancy, screamed, “Don’t hit her!”

Nancy jammed on the brakes so quickly that the rear of the car skidded around sideways in the road.

“Who?” she demanded, horrified.

“The woman in the road! Didn’t you see her? Maybe she’s under the car!”

Heartsick, Nancy jumped out one door, Bess another. They peered under the car, alongside it, in back of it. They could see no one.

“Are you sure you saw a woman?” Nancy inquired.

Just then another streak of lightning illuminated the sky, and Bess called out, “There goes someone running across that field!”

Nancy glanced quickly in that direction and saw the running figure of a woman. At that same moment the woman looked back over her shoul der, revealing a thin, haggard face. Nancy judged her to be in her early fifties.

All four girls stared in mystification. Nancy and Bess returned to the car and the journey was resumed.

“Why would any sane person be walking in such a storm?” Bess spoke up finally.

“She’s headed in the direction of the cavern,” said Joanne, and explained that they were now nearing the farm. “Maybe she’s one of those strange people over there!”

Nancy and her friends were immediately curious. Before they could ask what Joanne meant, the car reached the crest of a steep hill and Joanne cried out:

“There’s Red Gate Farm!” She pointed to the valley below them.

The storm had let up and the sun was coming out. The River Heights girls could clearly see the forty-acre farm, with its groves of pine trees and a winding river which curled along the valley. Everything looked green and fresh after the heavy rain.

“It’s beautiful!” exclaimed Bess.

“And cool—and peaceful,” Joanne added excitedly.

“Don’t count on much relaxation with Nancy around,” George advised their new friend. “She’ll find some adventure to occupy every waking hour!”

“Yes,” Bess agreed. “Adventure with mystery added.”

Nancy smiled. She reflected on the two mysteries she had already encountered; the unsolved case of the Blue Jade perfume and the strange code.

As the car descended into the valley, the girls caught a better glimpse of the farm with its huge red barn and various adjoining sheds and the large, rambling house, partly covered with vines. There were bright-red geraniums in the window boxes, and a freshly painted picket fence surrounding the yard.

Nancy stopped the car in front of the big red gate which opened into the garden. “Oh, I hope it’s not too late!” Joanne cried as she sprang out to unlatch the gate.

CHAPTER VII

Nature Cult

NANCY drove in to Red Gate Farm and parked. She consulted her watch and noted with dismay it was quarter to six. By now the farmhouse door had opened, and a gray-haired woman in a crisp gingham dress and white apron came hurrying out to meet them. Her blue eyes were bright as she welcomed Joanne warmly.

"My granddaughter told me how kind you all were to her in the city," she said to Nancy and her friends. "I can't thank you enough."

"Gram!" Joanne exclaimed. "I can't stand the suspense. Did you sell the farm to that man?"

Mrs. Byrd shook her head. "Mercy! I was so excited at your coming back I forgot to tell you. He phoned a little while ago and said that because of the storm he'd rather come here tomorrow—he could wait one more day."

Not only Joanne, but her visitors, heaved sighs of relief. Further discussion of the subject was deferred when Mrs. Byrd insisted the girls freshen up for supper.

They entered the large, rambling house, and a little later everyone sat down in the plainly furnished but comfortable dining room. Mrs. Byrd appeared very happy as she bustled about, serving the delicious meal of hot biscuits, sizzling ham, sweet potatoes, and coffee. The girls had not realized how hungry they were.

"Nothing like driving through a storm to work up an appetite." George grinned.

It was not until dessert—freshly baked lemon meringue pie—that Joanne mentioned again what was uppermost in her mind. "Gram," she said gently, *"please* call up that man and tell him you don't want to sell our farm. *Please.* We'll find a way to stay here, somehow. I'm sure there'll be answers to your ads for boarders."

Nancy quickly spoke up. "Yes, Mrs. Byrd. It certainly would be a shame to give up Red Gate. And besides, George, Bess, and I would like to be paying guests for a while—if you'd like us to stay, that is."

"Of course I want you all here as long as possible. But I really can't accept any money," Mrs. Byrd protested. "You have been so wonderful to Jo."

"If you won't let us pay our share, we'll have to return home tomorrow," Nancy insisted.

Mrs. Byrd finally relented and declared with a smile: "I believe I was just waiting to be dissuaded from taking that Mr. Kent's offer. I'll call him right now. He gave me his telephone number."

The girls followed her into the kitchen, and sat down while Mrs. Byrd went to the phone there and put in the call.

"Mr. Kent? I've decided not to sell Red Gate Farm—at any price.... No. I ... No.... Absolutely." The woman winced and held the phone away from her ear.

Nancy and her friends exchanged glances. The man was evidently incensed and was speaking so loudly they could hear his voice easily. Finally Mrs. Byrd put down the receiver.

"Well, I'm glad that man isn't going to own Red Gate," she declared. "He certainly was unpleasant. He even said I might regret my decision."

Joanne's face was radiant and she hugged her grandmother. "I feel so much better now." She turned to her new friends. "Somehow, I know you're going to bring us luck, Nancy, Bess, and George."

Suddenly Mrs. Byrd said, “Goodness! I’ve forgotten to look in our mailbox today.”

“I’ll go.” Joanne hurried outside and was back in a minute, several envelopes in her hand.

“Graml One of these is from the Round Valley *Gazette.* Do you think—?” Excitedly she handed the mail to her grandmother.

The girls watched eagerly as Mrs. Byrd tore open a long, bulky envelope and took out a number of enclosed letters. She looked at them quickly. A smile spread over her face.

“Gram, are they answers to the ad for board ers?” Joanne asked excitedly.

Mrs. Byrd nodded. “I can hardly believe it! Two people are arriving the day after tomorrow. First, a Mrs. Salisbury, then a Mr. Abbott. Several others will come later this month.”

“Wonderful!” Nancy said, and immediately offered her assistance in getting rooms ready.

“Count Bess and me in too,” said George.

Joanne and her grandmother at first demurred, but were outvoted. “Very well.” Mrs. Byrd smiled. “Tomorrow afternoon will be time enough to get things ready.”

Later, as the guests bid her good night, Mrs. Byrd said:

“Jo was right. You three girls *have* brought us luck. Bless you!”

George and Bess were shown to the room in which they would sleep. Nancy was to share Joanne’s bedroom.

“Oh, how sweet it smells in here,” Joanne commented, as Nancy unpacked.

“That’s some of the Oriental perfume which splashed on my clothes in the train,” said Nancy. “It certainly is strong and lasting!”

When Nancy awoke the next morning, warm sunlight was streaming through the windows. Joanne had already gone downstairs. Nancy’s first thought was to phone Police Chief McGinnis and find out about the owner, or owners, of the cars driven by the suspicious man. After dressing hurriedly she went to the first floor and placed the call.

“Good morning, Nancy,” the officer said. “Here’s the information you wanted. Both cars were rented from drive-yourself agencies by a man named Philip Smith, a native of Dallas, Texas. They’ve been returned.”

Nancy thanked the chief and hung up. “That clue wasn’t any help,” she thought. “None of those suspicious men talked like a Texan. The name Philip Smith was probably phony, and made up on the spur of the moment. Also, a forged driver’s license might have been used.”

Presently Bess and George came down and the girls enjoyed a delicious breakfast of pancakes and sausages. Afterward, Joanne took the girls on a tour of the farm. She showed them the lovely gardens, a large chicken house, and her pet goat, Chester.

A turkey took a dislike to Bess and chased her to the farmhouse porch, much to the amusement of the onlookers! Joanne came to the rescue and chased the turkey away.

“Our farm isn’t very well stocked,” she admitted as she led the way to the barn. “We keep only one cow and one work horse. Poor old Michael should be retired on a pension, but we can’t afford to lose him yet!”

Joanne cheerfully hailed the hired man. Reuben Ames was about forty years old, red-haired, and rather quiet in manner. He acknowledged each introduction with a mumbled “Pleased to meet you, miss,” and extended a work-worn hand for each girl to shake. Reuben shifted uncomfortably and then returned to the barn.

“Reuben is as good as gold, even if he is bashful,” Joanne told the girls. “I don’t know what we’d do without him.”

“We’d better keep an eye on Bess,” George teased. “She’ll be breaking another heart.”

Bess made a good-natured retort as the girls started for the orchard. George demonstrated her agility by climbing the nearest apple tree. Once back at the farmhouse, Nancy asked curiously, “Jo, please tell us more about the cave that you spoke about yesterday. I’m bursting to know all about it.”

"Well, the cave is on a piece of land along the river which Gram rents out."

"Oh, then I suppose it'll be impossible for us to visit the cavern," Nancy commented.

"I don't see why we can't. It's still our land." Joanne frowned. "A queer lot of people are renting it, though."

"How do you mean?" Nancy questioned, recalling Joanne's remark of the previous day.

"They're some sort of sect—a nature cult, I think, and part of a large organization. At least that's what it said in the letter Gram received from their leader. Anyway, this group calls itself the Black Snake Colony."

"Pleasant name," Bess observed cynically.

"I'm not sure what they do," Joanne admitted. "We've never even spoken to any members. I suppose they believe in living an outdoor life."

"You can live that way without joining a nature cult," George said dryly. "I suppose they dance when the dew is on the grass and such nonsense!"

"Believe it or not they do dance!" Joanne laughed. "But only nights when the moon is out. I've seen them from here in the moonlight. It's an eerie sight. They wear white robes and flit around waving their arms. They even wear masks!"

"Masks!" Nancy exclaimed. "Why?"

"I can't imagine. It all sounds senseless. But the rent money is helpful."

"Do they live in this cavern?" George asked in amazement.

"No, they live in shacks and tents near the river. I've never really had the nerve to visit the place. Of course if you girls went along—"

"When can we go?" Nancy asked excitedly.

"I'll speak to Gram," Joanne offered.

"It's odd you've never spoken to any of the colony members," Nancy remarked thoughtfully. "Who pays the rent?"

"It's sent by mail. They even leased the land that way."

"Didn't it strike you as a peculiar way of doing business?" Nancy asked.

"Yes," Joanne admitted, "but I suppose it's part of their creed, or whatever you call it. They probably don't believe in mingling with people outside the cult. That's often the case."

Directly after lunch the girls helped the Byrds straighten and clean the rooms for the expected boarders. They hung curtains, newly made by Mrs. Byrd, and put fresh flowers in each room.

At the end of the afternoon they were very pleased with the result.

"All you girls have worked hard enough," Mrs. Byrd said. "You go rest while I fix supper."

She was insistent, so Joanne led her friends to the porch. Bess stretched out in the hammock and picked up the day's newspaper. The others chatted. Suddenly Bess gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Nancy," she asked tensely, "what was the name of that girl who sold me the perfume?"

"Wong," Nancy answered in amazement. "Yvonne Wong. Why?"

"Because there's an article in the paper that mentions her name!" Bess thrust the newspaper into Nancy's hands, indicating the paragraph. "Wow! This is something! Read it yourself!"

CHAPTER VIII

Hillside Ghosts

NANCY read aloud:

"'The Hale Syndicate, which has been engaged in the illegal importation of Oriental articles, has been dissolved by court order.'" Nancy looked up and said, "I don't see what that has to do with our perfume friend Yvonne Wong."

"A great deal," Bess declared. "Read on and you'll find out!"

"Oh!" Nancy exclaimed a few seconds later. "Yvonne was employed by the syndicate as a clerk in their shop. She hasn't been indicted, because of insufficient evidence, and the top men have skipped!"

Bess nodded, realizing the impact of her important discovery. "That perfume store we visited must have been owned by the syndicate!"

"How long ago was the fraud discovered?" George asked.

"The article doesn't say," Nancy returned. "It has just now been made public."

"It doesn t surprise me that the Wong girl was mixed up in some underhanded affair," George remarked. "I didn't like her attitude from the beginning!

"Nor did I," Bess added. "And I liked her less after Nancy found out she had received the job Jo wanted."

"I'm certainly glad I didn't get that job." Joanne smiled. "I'd much rather be here."

"Do you suppose Yvonne knew the work of the syndicate was dishonest?" Bess asked with concern.

"I'm sure of it," George answered flatly. "But it looks as if she and the others slipped out quickly when the federal authorities became aware of the racket."

All this time Nancy had been staring into space. It had occurred to her that Yvonne Wong might still be employed by the syndicate. Undoubtedly the name and offices had been changed to throw off the federal authorities. Was Room 305 now the syndicate's headquarters?

Nancy immediately thought of the coded message she had brought with her. "The third number in it, 5, was the letter H," she told herself. Then she reflected on the recent newspaper article about the syndicate.

"This'H' might stand for Hale!" she thought excitedly. "And the line over it might mean that someone by this name is Important—the ring-leader, perhaps! I must talk to Chief McGinnis again. I may have stumbled onto a clue to those missing Hale Syndicate men!"

After supper she phoned the chief and pro-pounded her theory. "Well, Nancy," he said, "it sounds as if you might have picked up a clue, sure enough. Send me a copy of that code and I'll get busy on it."

After Nancy completed the call, she and the other girls studied the code once more.

Gazing at the 16 and the 5, Nancy suddenly said, "M—M—why that could stand for Maurice! Maybe that man's name is Maurice Hale!"

"Now I'll sleep better," Bess sighed. The girls went to bed happy and excited.

The next day everyone's attention was focused on a new boarder. Shortly after church services, Mrs. Alice Salisbury and her daughter Nona arrived in an expensive sedan. Mrs.

Salisbury walked with a cane, and complained loudly of her arthritis as the girls helped her into the house.

Nona waited only long enough to see that her mother was made comfortable. Then she announced that she must hurry back to the city nearby, where she lived.

"Mother was born on a farm," she told Mrs. Byrd as she stepped into the car, "and she simply pines for the country. I thought this arrangement might be ideal since she's never entirely happy with me in the city. I'll drive down to see her week ends. I do hope she'll be happier here at Red Gate Farm."

Joanne and her friends hoped so too, but they were not at all certain, for it became increasingly apparent that Mrs. Salisbury could not be happy anywhere. She found no fault with the immaculate farmhouse or the lovely view from her bedroom window, but she constantly complained of her various aches and pains. She talked incessantly about her many operations. She had a sharp tongue and delighted in using it.

"She wouldn't be so bad, if only she'd stop talking operations," George burst out. "Makes me feel as though I'm ready for the hospital myself!"

By the time the girls had adjusted themselves to Mrs. Salisbury, the second boarder arrived. He was Karl Abbott, a diamond-in-the-rough type of man. In spite of his sixty-three years, he boasted that he was as spry as his son Karl Jr., who had brought him.

Karl Jr., who worked in a nearby city, was a personable young man. The girls, particularly Bess, were sorry he could not remain with his father.

The girls liked Mr. Abbott very much, but they were appalled by his tremendous appetite. "I wish we could turn him out in the yard to forage for himself," Joanne sighed several days later as she peeled her second heaping pan of potatoes. "It's all I can do to keep one helping ahead of him!"

At first Mr. Abbott insisted upon remaining in the kitchen, teasing the girls as they worked and sampling the food. Then he fell into the habit of sitting on the front porch with Mrs. Salisbury and chatting with her for hours. Frequently they became involved in violent arguments about trivial matters just for diversion.

After one of their disagreements Mrs. Salisbury would maintain a stony silence which was refreshing. But Mr. Abbott would once again take refuge in the kitchen!

In spite of such slight annoyances, the days at Red Gate Farm passed very pleasantly. Nancy would go into town on various errands for the boarders and sometimes Mrs. Byrd.

One day she had just returned to the farm from a shopping trip and on her way to the house stopped at the mailbox.

"There might be a letter from Dad," she thought, and drew out a stack of mail.

She took it all into the house, where Mrs. Byrd asked Nancy to distribute the letters. As she was sorting them out, she came to one addressed to the Black Snake Colony.

"Look!" Nancy exclaimed. "This letter belongs to the nature cult. The mailman must have put it in our box by mistake."

"What will you do?" asked Bess seriously. "Drive over with it?"

"Of course not," growled Mr. Abbott, who had just entered the room. "You keep away from those outrageous people. Take it back to the post office."

Nancy studied the postmark. It was very blurred. Could it be Riverside Heights, or was she mistaken? Her curiosity about the mysterious cult was now even more aroused. Perhaps she could deliver the letter in person! But she got no further in her plan, for just then a neighbor passed on his way to town. Mrs. Byrd handed him the letter to remail.

Nancy felt disappointed, but was determined to find out in some way what was going on "over the hill." "If I can only be alone with Bess and George a little later, maybe we can come up with some plan" she thought.

There had been a letter from Mr. Drew, informing Nancy that he had returned home. "At least Dad's making progress on his case!" she said to herself.

Then Nancy hurried off to the barn where the "city slickers," as Reuben called them, were to have a milking lesson.

"It's no trick at all!" Bess insisted. "Give me that pail and I'll show you just how it's done."

Reuben handed over the bucket, and Bess marched determinedly up to the cow.

"Nice bossy," she murmured, giving the animal a timid pat on the neck.

The cow responded with a suspicious look and flirt of her tail. As Bess set down the milking stool, the cow kicked it over.

Bess sprang back in alarm. "You can't expect me to milk a vicious cow!" she exclaimed.

Joanne and Reuben exploded with laughter.

"Primrose is an extremely smart cow," Reuben drawled. "She won't stand being milked except from the side she's used to!"

Reluctantly Bess picked up the overturned stool and went around to the left side. The cow leisurely moved herself sideways.

"I give up! Here, you try it, George."

"Oh, no, Bess. I wouldn't spoil your fun for anything!"

After a great deal of maneuvering, Bess succeeded in handling the whole procedure to the satisfaction of Primrose. Nancy came last, and she, too, was a bit awkward. When Reuben finally sat down to do the milking, the girls watched him with admiration. "It just takes practice," he said, smiling.

That evening Mrs. Salisbury and Mr. Abbott had their usual disagreement and both retired early. Mrs. Byrd soon followed, leaving the girls alone on the porch.

"Do you think there will be any activity on the hill tonight?" George asked suddenly.

"I'm not sure," Joanne answered. "But it's a good clear night and the moon is full, so the setting is perfect for it."

"I'm dying to see what those nature enthusiasts look like," added Bess. "Just so they don't come too close!"

It was a lovely evening and Nancy had been only half listening to the chatter. She remained silent and thoughtful. The letter addressed to the Black Snake Colony was still very much on her mind.

"What's up, Nancy?" Bess finally asked, noticing her friend's silence.

"Three guesses," Nancy replied with a laugh. "I'm still curious about that envelope I had in my hands this afternoon. I'm almost certain that blurred postmark read Riverside Heights."

"Even if it did," George remarked, "it could have been written by almost anyone and simply *mailed* in Riverside Heights."

"I suppose you're right," Nancy agreed. "I guess I'm trying too hard. But let's walk over toward the hill."

The four girls started off. They crossed one field in front of the house and were just climbing a rail fence to the next one when Nancy cried out:

"Am I seeing things? Look! Over there on that hill!"

Following her gaze, the girls were astonished to see shadowy white figures flitting about in the moonlight.

"Ghosts!" Bess exclaimed.

"Ghosts nothing," George retorted. "There's no such animal!"

"Don't be alarmed," Joanne said with a smile. "I imagine the members of the nature cult are having one of their festive airings by the light of the moon!"

The girls watched the cult members go through their mystic rites.

"They're not doing much of anything," Nancy observed, "except flapping around."

Within ten minutes the ceremony apparently was concluded. The white figures clustered together for a moment, then moved off across the hillside.

"I wonder where they're heading," Nancy mused. "Back to their tents?"

Joanne had been watching intently. Now she shook her head. "I don't think so. I forgot to tell you—the cave has another opening on the slope of the hill, near the river. The colony members are going in that direction."

Immediately Nancy's curiosity was aroused. Did this mean the white-robed group intended to go into the cave itself? If so, why? To continue the ceremony?

"It certainly was a short performance," Bess remarked as the mysterious "dancers" vanished from sight. "I wonder if the ritual has any significance."

"That's what I'd like to know," Nancy said quietly. "And that's what we must find out!"

"Not tonight!" Joanne said firmly. "Grandmother will be very upset if we don't come right back."

Reluctantly Nancy gave up the idea. The girls started for the farmhouse, but Nancy kept looking back over her shoulder, determined not to miss anything. However, the hillside remained uninhabited and still.

As the girls drew near the road, the motor of a car broke the silence and headlights appeared. The automobile slowed down in front of the farmhouse as if about to stop. Then suddenly the car went on. Why? Nancy wondered. Had the driver seen the girls and changed his mind?

CHAPTER IX

Black Snake Colony Member

NANCY was too far away from the car to see its driver or license plate. Thoughtfully she went to bed, but lay awake for some time, feeling completely baffled over the many mysterious happenings.

By morning she felt eager for action. Ever since her arrival at Red Gate Farm, Nancy had wanted to visit the cavern on the hillside. The strange moonlight ceremony and the unidentified car which had hesitated in front of the house only intensified her interest in the place.

She broached the subject of a visit there to Mrs. Byrd, but Joanne's grandmother frowned on the idea. "I'll worry if you go," she said. "Those folks are probably harmless, but we don't know much about them. I wish now I had never rented the land. The neighbors are saying I was foolish to do it in the first place."

"And so you were!" Mrs. Salisbury, who had overheard the conversation, chimed in. "You'll ruin the value of your farm. Why, people around are saying dreadful things about the members of that cult. Even Reuben is afraid to go near the place!"

"I'm not," Nancy announced. "I think it would be fun to investigate."

Mrs. Salisbury snorted. "Fun! Girls these days have strange ideas of fun! First thing you know, Mrs. Byrd, she'll be wanting to join the colony!"

"Nonsense." Mrs. Byrd smiled.

In order to avoid further dissension, Nancy dropped the subject of the cave. But that afternoon she set out alone on a hike. Making her way to the woods which skirted the river, Nancy struck a well-worn path and decided to continue along it.

She had walked only a short way when the sound of a faint cry came to her. Nancy halted in the path and listened intently. The cry was not repeated.

"Maybe I imagined it," she said to herself.

Nevertheless, Nancy quickened her pace, looking about her as she walked. As she rounded a bend a few minutes later, she was startled to see a woman hunched over on the ground, writhing in pain.

"What's the matter?" Nancy cried out, hurrying over to her. Then the girl's eyes widened. This was the woman she had seen running across a field the night of the storm.

"I tripped on a root in the path," the woman murmured, rocking back and forth in pain. "My ankle—it's broken."

Nancy dropped to one knee and quickly examined the injured ankle. It was swelling rapidly, but all the bones seemed to be in place.

"See if you can stand," she advised.

With Nancy's help the woman managed to get to her feet, but winced as she tried to take her first step.

"It isn't broken," Nancy said gently, "but you have a bad sprain."

"Oh, what'll I do now?" the woman moaned.

"Do you live far from here?" Nancy asked.

The stranger looked at her rather queerly and did not answer at once. Nancy thought she

had not understood, so repeated the question.

"About a quarter of a mile up the river," was the mumbled response. "I'll get there all right."

"You're scarcely able to walk a step," Nancy said with a troubled frown. "Please let me run back to the farm and bring help."

"No, no," the woman protested, clutching Nancy fearfully by the arm. "I don't want to be a bother to anyone!"

"Nonsense! You shouldn't be walking at all. It won't take me a minute to get someone to help you."

The woman shook her head stubbornly. "My foot feels better now. I can walk by myself."

She started off, but nearly collapsed by the time she had taken three steps.

"If you won't let me go for help, then at least let me take you home."

Again the woman protested, but Nancy took hold of her arm and placed it over her own shoulder. With Nancy's support, the woman made slow and painful progress up the path.

"This is killing you," Nancy said, dismayed that the woman was so foolishly stubborn. "I can get our hired man to carry you—"

"No!" the woman objected vehemently.

Her unwillingness to accept help puzzled Nancy. As they made their way slowly along, she became aware that her companion's distress was not entirely due to pain, but partially to Nancy's own presence. This mystified Nancy, but she could not turn back as long as she knew the woman really needed her.

"I don't remember seeing any houses along the river," Nancy said after a time. "You're not a member of the nature cult, are you?"

A half-cynical expression crossed the woman's face, then one of sadness. "Yes," she returned quietly, "I'm one of the members."

Nancy took time to scrutinize her companion more carefully than before. She wore a blue gingham dress which was plain and durable, and certainly did not appear to be a costume. The woman did not speak or act as Nancy imagined a member of the cult would. She seemed like any other person.

"It must be healthful to live an outdoor life," Nancy remarked, feeling that some comment was necessary. "I've often looked over at your tents and thought I should like to visit the colony some time."

The woman stopped abruptly in the path and faced Nancy, an odd look on her face.

"You must never come near!"

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't be safe!"

"Not safe!" Nancy echoed in astonishment. "I don't understand."

"I—I mean the members of the cult don't want folks prying around," the woman said hastily.

"I see. The rites are secret?"

"That's it," the woman said in obvious relief.

"But why couldn't I visit the colony sometime when ceremonies aren't being held?" Nancy persisted.

"You mustn't come near the hillside—ever!" the stranger warned.

The two continued up the path. To Nancy it was apparent that her questions had disturbed the woman, for several times she caught her looking distressed and worried.

As they approached the hillside colony, and before they were within sight of the tents, the woman stopped short.

“Thank you for your help,” she said quietly. “I can make it alone from here.”

Nancy hesitated. The woman’s firm tone told her it would do no good to protest. She was not going to let Nancy come any nearer the camp!

“At least let me find something that you can use as a cane,” Nancy said.

She searched along the path and found a branch that was strong enough. The woman accepted it gratefully. Her face softened and she stood for an instant, looking intently at Nancy.

“You’re a good girl to help a stranger like me. I wish—” The woman turned away abruptly. “Remember,” she advised sternly over her shoulder, “don’t ever come near the camp!”

Still perplexed, Nancy watched the woman hobble away. It took her a long time to reach the top of the hill, but at last she disappeared from sight.

“I can’t understand why the poor thing acted the way she did,” Nancy said to herself as she sat down on a log to think. “What harm could it have done if I’d gone with her to the colony? The cult must have some very important secrets!”

The more Nancy considered the matter, the more baffled she became.

“You must never come near the hillside!”

"The woman didn't look as though being a member of the Black Snake Colony made her very happy," Nancy thought. "If they're so afraid that someone will discover their secrets, they must be doing more than just flitting at night in white robes! Maybe that's only to keep people from guessing what really goes on there!"

As Nancy reached this startling conclusion, she jumped up and walked briskly toward Red Gate Farm.

"There's one thing certain," she said to herself with a chuckle. "Now that the woman has forbidden me to go near the camp, I can't resist finding out what's happening there!"

Nancy was just approaching the farmhouse when she heard the phone ringing. She hurried inside and answered it.

"Yes, this is Nancy Drew," she replied to a strange man's question.

"One moment."

While Nancy waited, she wondered who the caller might be. Was someone going to threaten her to desist in her detective work?

"Oh!" she said as the next speaker announced himself as Chief McGinnis. A sense of relief came over the girl.

"I have some news, Nancy," the officer said. "It's discouraging. Nothing on the code or the missing men." Then he chuckled. "We need another clue from you."

Nancy realized her old friend was teasing. "Glad to help," she said gaily. "What's the assignment?"

"To find out where the Hale Syndicate moved to after it left Room 305."

"Then that was their headquarters!" Nancy cried excitedly.

"Temporarily. But they left no forwarding address," the police chief said.

"If we could decipher the rest of the code we might be able to trace them," Nancy said. "Anyhow, I'll be on the lookout for any clues. At least it shouldn't be too hard to find Yvonne Wong."

Chief McGinnis agreed and assured Nancy he would let her know if there were any new developments. Then he asked, "And what are you doing? Any mysteries up your way?"

"There might be." She told him the little she had been able to glean about the mysterious nature cult. She described the unusual moonlight ceremony the girls had witnessed and the appearance of the unidentified car.

The police chief whistled in amazement. "Sounds as though you do have another mystery up your sleeve! Have you come across any possible clues to what the cult is worshiping, Nancy?"

The girl detective hesitated a moment before telling Chief McGinnis about her curious conversation with the woman she had assisted in the woods. She decided to mention it, and added that although the woman had readily admitted to being a member of the cult, she had given Nancy no reason for her firm warning to stay away from the meeting place.

"Black Snake Colony, eh?" the police chief said reflectively.

"Yes," Nancy replied. "Have you ever heard of it?"

"No, but let me look in a report we have here on all cults. I'll call you right back."

Nancy waited eagerly for the phone to ring. When it did she snatched up the receiver. "The Black Snake Colony is not listed," Chief McGinnis told her.

"You mean it's a phony?" Nancy asked excitedly.

CHAPTER X

Plan of Attack

CHIEF McGINNIS refused to comment on the possibility that the Black Snake Colony might be a phony group.

"They may not have been in existence long enough to be known," he replied. "But you might try to find out what you can and let me know."

"I'll do that," the young detective agreed.

After Nancy had put down the phone, she reflected for a long minute on the new twist to the hillside mystery, then walked out to the front porch, where Mrs. Salisbury, Mr. Abbott, and the three girls were seated.

Nancy had not planned to tell them of her experience, but her face was so animated it revealed her thoughts. They besieged her with questions until finally she revealed her meeting with the woman member of the strange nature cult.

"Told you not to come near, did she?" Mrs. Salisbury cackled. "Well, I hope you intend to follow her advice."

Nancy laughed and shook her head. "I'm more interested than ever in what's going on up there on the hillside. I'm ready for a little adventure right about now!"

"So am I," George chimed in.

Joanne nodded vigorously, while Bess, always more cautious, agreed rather halfheartedly.

"Better stay away," Mr. Abbott advised, for once not contradicting Mrs. Salisbury. "You can't tell what may be going on there."

Nancy was tempted to comment, but instead she forced a smile and said, "It seems to me that this matter may be of deep concern to Jo and her grandmother, if not to me."

Mrs. Byrd had stepped to the porch door in time to get the gist of the conversation, and at once spoke up.

"I think Nancy is right," she declared thoughtfully. "Of course, I don't want the girls to go looking for trouble, but I'm beginning to think someone ought to investigate those mysterious people. If anything questionable is going on, I want to know about it. I'll ask the Black Snake Colony to move out, even if I do lose the rent. Why, I might get into trouble myself if they stay."

Mr. Abbott and Mrs. Salisbury fell into an injured silence. Nancy gave her friends a sly wink, and in a few minutes they all quietly withdrew to the springhouse to discuss their plans. Here, she told the girls about her conversation with Chief McGinnis.

"Something peculiar is going on at those cult meetings, I'm sure," Nancy went on, "and I must find out about them if I can. Do you all want to join me in the investigation?"

"Of course," Joanne and George said.

"Do you think it'll be safe?" Bess asked.

"I'm not making any rash promises." Nancy laughed.

Bess gave a little shiver. "I don't like it, but count me in."

"How can we visit the colony without being caught?" George asked.

"That's the problem," Nancy replied. "We must make our plans carefully. Before we do anything, I suggest we find out about the robes the cult members wear. We may need to wear

similar ones to help us in our investigation."

"There's only one way to find that out," Joanne said. "Some night when they're having a ceremonial meeting, we can sneak through the woods and try to get a closer look at what's going on."

Nancy nodded excitedly. "The double entrance to the cave will be perfect!" she said. "If we can't sneak into the meetings any other way, we can get into the cave at the end they don't use."

"Sounds terribly risky to me!" Bess commented.

"Oh, for Pete's sake," George said scornfully. "Don't be such a wet blanket, Bess!"

Her cousin opened her mouth to retort, but Nancy interposed quickly to forestall any further argument.

"We'd better not tell our plan to anyone except your grandmother, Jo," she advised. "Otherwise, Mrs. Salisbury and Mr. Abbott will try to talk her out of letting us investigate."

After a light supper and some rather forced conversation on trivial matters, the girls retired. They had tried to keep silent about the activities of the nature cult, but their secretive manner did not escape the notice of Mrs. Salisbury and Mr. Abbott.

"You're up to something," Mrs. Salisbury remarked the next morning. "And if I were Mrs. Byrd, I'd put a stop to it at once!"

Mrs. Byrd, however, went on serenely with her work, being careful not to interfere with the girls' plans. They maintained a close watch of the hillside, but for two days seldom saw anyone in the vicinity.

"I think they've holed in for the rest of the summer," George declared impatiently at breakfast. "Either that, or they've moved out."

"The cult's still there," Joanne reassured her. "The rent check arrived in the morning mail."

"By the way, where do these nature people get their food?" Nancy queried. "They can't live on blue sky and inspiration."

"I think friends must bring food to them in automobiles," Joanne answered. "Several times I've seen swanky cars drive up and park near the hillside."

"The cult members must be fairly well off, then," Nancy said thoughtfully. "I'm getting tired of marking time. I wish something would happen soon. If it doesn't, I think I'll investigate that cave, anywayl"

That night the girls were late in finishing the dishes. By the time they had put everything away it was quite dark. When they went out to the porch, they were relieved to find that the boarders had gone to their rooms.

The girls sat talking quietly for some time. The moon was high, and Nancy, from force of habit, glanced eagerly toward the distant hill.

"Look, girls!" she exclaimed. "They're at it again!"

The four girls could see white objects moving to and fro, apparently going through a weird ritual. Nancy sprang to her feet.

"We'll have to hurry if we want to see anything," she said. "Come on! We'll take the short cut!"

They dashed across the lawn, flung open the gate, and ran through the woods. Nancy led the way up the river path, then to the sparsely wooded hillside. Not until they were dose to the camp did she stop.

"We'll have to be very careful," she warned in a whisper. "Scatter and hide behind trees. And don't make a sound."

The girls obeyed, Bess staying as close to George as possible. Nancy found a huge oak tree well up the hill, and hid behind it. From this vantage point she could see fairly welL

Nancy had been there for less than five minutes when she heard the sound of several cars approaching. They came up the woods road and stopped at the foot of the hill, not far from

the nature camp.

Several men stepped from the cars. Nancy was too far away to see their faces, but she did observe that they quickly donned long white robes with head masks, and joined the other costumed figures who were on the brow of the hill.

For nearly ten minutes the members of the cult flitted back and forth, waving their arms and making weird noises. Then they moved single file toward the cavern and vanished.

Suddenly Nancy felt herself grasped by an arm. She wheeled sharply and then laughed softly.

"George! For goodness sake, don't ever do that again! You scared me silly!"

"What do you make of it, Nancy?"

"It's the strangest thing I've ever seen. I haven't been able to figure it out."

"What should we do next?" asked Bess, who had joined them.

"Let's follow them into the cave!" George proposed rashly.

"And be caught?" Nancy returned. "No, this is serious business. I think it's time to go home and plan our own costumes."

"I wonder why so many people came here in automobiles?" Joanne mused, as the girls walked off slowly.

"That's what I've been wondering," Nancy replied soberly, "but I think I might know."

"Why?" her friends demanded.

"It looks to me as if only a few persons are actually living in the Black Snake Colony. Apparently they want to give the impression that the organization is a large one, so they have these other people come the night set for the ceremonials."

"There were certainly a lot of men in those cars," added Bess.

"Why should they go to all that trouble?" Joanne asked doubtfully.

"I don't know," Nancy admitted, "unless it's because they're trying to hide something they're doing here." She changed the subject. "I think we'll be able to make costumes like theirs if you'll give us some old pillowcases and sheets, Jo. When we visit the cave, we must disguise ourselves to make our scheme work!"

CHAPTER XI

A Midnight Message

"WHEN shall we visit the cave?" George asked.

"As soon as we can," Nancy answered. "Of course we must help Jo and her grandmother with the work."

Since there was no further evidence of activity on the hillside, the girls went to bed.

The next morning George remarked, as she helped Nancy make her bed, "What do you suppose those men do between ceremonials? It certainly is strange how much time they spend in that cave!"

"What puzzles me is those automobiles that were on the hillside," Bess said. "Why did they come? Surely those men were here for something besides ballet dancing. What's your guess, Nancy?"

"I'm afraid I haven't any answer. But I mean to find one for Mrs. Byrd's and Jo's sakes."

The three girls learned that Reuben was due to be absent most of the day and offered to do his chores. During the morning they picked cherries and took them to town to sell at a local market. When they returned, a small, strange car was standing in the driveway. Loud voices were coming from the living room.

"I don't have to sell and I won't sell!" Mrs. Byrd said with finality in her tone.

"That's what you think," a man said sneeringly. "You're going to lose this farm and I can buy it cheaper from the bank. Why don't you sell it to me and make a little profit? Then you can go to the city and take life easy."

"We don't want to go to the city," Joanne spoke up. "We're getting along all right here. More boarders are coming soon and we are paying off our back mortgage interest. So we don't have to sell."

Outside, Nancy, Bess, and George looked at one another. The insistent buyer again! Fervently they hoped that Mrs. Byrd would not weaken in her decision. A moment later they felt relieved.

"I will say good afternoon, Mr. Kent," Mrs. Byrd said. "Thank you for your offer, but I cannot accept it."

"You'll be sorry! You'll regret this!" the caller stormed. He came out the screen door, slamming it viciously behind him.

Nancy stared in surprise. Mr. Kent certainly was one of the most ill-mannered men she had ever seen! And also, she thought wryly, one of the most tenacious! Why was he so determined to buy the Byrd home?

Mr. Kent, his face red with anger, stepped into his car and sped off, but not before he gave Nancy and her friends a baleful look. "Nice disposition," George commented sarcastically.

"I hope he never shows up again," Bess said firmly.

The girls found Mrs. Byrd and Joanne quite shaken. "I can't understand that man's persistence," the woman said.

Nancy was sure the matter was tied in with the cult on the hillside but did not mention this theory. She merely said, "Try not to worry about Mr. Kent. I doubt that he'll return."

Soon the incident was forgotten as preparations for supper were started and the farm

animals were fed. George elected to take care of gathering eggs from the henhouse. Bess gave the horse hay and water.

"I'll get the cow," Nancy offered, and went off toward the pasture to drive Primrose in.

But the cow was not there. Nancy walked around the fence surrounding the field to see if there was any opening through which the animal might have wandered. Finally she found one, and saw hoofprints leading toward a patch of woods.

Nancy dashed off among the trees. She had never been that way before, but there was only one path to follow. Several times she paused to listen and thought she heard the faint tinkling of a cowbell somewhere ahead of her.

It was rapidly growing dusky in the woods and Nancy hurried on. Again she stopped to listen. She could hear the cowbell distinctly now.

"Primrose can't be far ahead," she thought in relief, and went in that direction. Nancy finally caught sight of the Jersey contentedly munching grass on the hillside beyond.

Nancy stopped short and gave a gasp of astonishment—the sound of the cowbell had brought her to the mouth of the cave!

"I can hardly believe it!" she almost exclaimed aloud. This must be the other opening near the nature camp Jo told me about!"

Eagerly Nancy rushed toward the cave. But no sooner had she peered into the dark entrance than she was startled by the crackling of a twig behind her. Nancy wheeled to find a man standing not three feet away from her!

He seemed to have risen from the bushes which half hid the opening of the cave. Instantly it flashed through Nancy's mind that he had been stationed there to see that intruders did not enter.

"What're you doing here?" he asked, his voice as cold as steel.

Nancy recoiled. The man stood in the shadows of the shrubbery so that she could not see his face distinctly. But at the sound of his voice she knew instantly she was in danger.

"I must persuade him I wasn't spying," she thought desperately.

"Better speak up!" the man snarled. "What're you doin' here, girlie?"

"I was hunting for that cow," Nancy replied as casually as possible. She pointed to the Jersey, which was grazing a short distance away.

She held her ground defiantly. There was a moment's silence. Nancy could feel that the man was staring at her, as if undecided whether or not to believe her.

"So you were after the cow?" the lookout growled. "Then why are you by this cave?"

"Why, I was just wondering what was inside," Nancy said innocently. "Surely there's no harm in looking."

"You've no business around here!" the man snapped. "This property belongs to the members of the Black Snake Colony."

"Oh!" Nancy exclaimed in pretended awe. "Then you must belong to the colony. How very interesting!"

The man made no response to Nancy's remark. Instead, he muttered:

"Round up that old cow of yours and get out of here! And don't come trespassing again!"

Nancy knew she would gain nothing by arguing. Obediently she overtook the cow and headed her back toward Red Gate. The man watched until Nancy disappeared into the woods.

As soon as she had started the cow down the path, however, Nancy quietly retraced her steps. She reached the edge of the woods just in time to catch a glimpse of the man entering the cave.

"That proves he's one of the Black Snake group," she told herself. "He was acting as a guard for them."

For an instant Nancy was tempted to follow, but common sense told her not to press her

luck. The lookout seemed determined enough to make trouble for her if she took the chance. Reluctantly, the young sleuth turned back toward the farm.

It was clear to Nancy that the entire business of the Black Snake group was anything but open and aboveboard! Obviously they were afraid that some of the countryfolk would attempt to investigate.

When Nancy finally reached the barn and Joanne began to milk Primrose, the other girls plied their friend with questions.

"We were beginning to worry," Joanne said in relief. "I wouldn't have let you go alone if I'd known this cow of ours would stray so far."

"I'm glad I went," Nancy said quickly.

She then told the others what had taken place near the mouth of the cave. They gasped in astonishment upon hearing of her encounter with the lookout.

"Weren't you frightened when he sprang up out of nowhere?" Bess asked, giving Nancy an admiring glance. "I'd have fainted on the spot!"

"That's an easy way out if I ever heard one!" Nancy commented with a laugh.

"Girls don't faint these days," George scoffed. "Probably you'd have screamed and brought all the members down on you. They'd have dragged you off and put an end to you!"

"Thanks, George," Bess muttered. "You say the nicest things!"

"Well, girls, talk all you like," Nancy added, "but don't lose your nerve altogether. I still want to get a closer look at that cave!"

"Not tonight!" Bess said firmly.

Nancy smiled. "I hope there won't be a ritual on the hillside tonight. We've been too busy to get our costumes ready."

The girls watched but the distant landscape remained dark. Finally they went to bed. Not long afterward, Nancy was roused from a fitful slumber by the stopping of a car not far from her window. She hopped from bed and went to peer out. A tall, slender woman who wore her hair piled high was walking to the front door.

Nancy leaned out the window and called, "What is it you wish?"

"Nancy Drew. Is she here?"

"Yes, I'm Nancy."

"I have a letter for you." Nancy did not recognize the woman's voice. But she might be disguising it.

"From whom?"

"Your father."

"Why are you bringing it now?"

"It's an urgent message," the strange woman said. "I'll leave it on the doorstep."

She dropped the letter, hurried into the car, and the man at the wheel drove off. Heart pounding, Nancy put on her robe and slippers and hurried down to the front door.

CHAPTER XII

Secret Service Agents

THE stopping of the car at the house had awakened Mrs. Byrd who slept on the first floor. She met Nancy in the hall and asked what was happening.

Quickly Nancy told her, then opened the door. On the porch lay a plain envelope with Nancy's name typed on it.

"This seems like a peculiar way for your father to get in touch with you," Mrs. Byrd remarked. "Why didn't he phone if it's urgent?"

"I don't understand it myself," Nancy answered, as she tore open the letter.

The message was typewritten and was succinct. Nancy was to return home at once. Her father needed her. She was not to try to communicate with him. He could not explain why. It was signed "Dad."

Nancy read the letter to Mrs. Byrd. "Oh, I couldn't let you start out at this time of night alone," the woman said at once. "You must wait until morning."

"This whole thing doesn't seem like Dad," Nancy reflected. "He wouldn't send a terse note like this even if he *were* in some kind of trouble."

Mrs. Byrd was very much concerned. "It seems to me he would have called you on the phone in an emergency," she offered thoughtfully.

"Yes," Nancy agreed, "that's why this puzzles me so. But don't you worry about it, Mrs. Byrd. This is something I'll have to try to figure out myself."

"But, my dear," Mrs. Byrd repeated, "it's impossible for you to do anything about it at this hour."

Nancy carefully studied the note again. Suddenly she became aware of a familiar scent of perfume. The young detective held the envelope to her nostrils. It had been handled by someone who used the distinctive Blue Jade scent which Bess had purchased!

Instantly Nancy was alerted. "It wouldn't surprise me, Mrs. Byrd, if this letter is a phony! I'm going to call Dad, even though it's an unearthly hour to waken him."

She picked up the receiver in the hall. No sound reached her ears. "I'm afraid the line is dead," she told Mrs. Byrd. "Does this happen often?"

"It has never happened before," Mrs. Byrd said. "I made a call after supper and everything was all right then."

Nancy stood in perplexed silence. Had her father tried to get her, found the line out of order, then given the note to the couple? The woman might have carried the letter in a handbag which contained a purse-size bottle of the Oriental perfume.

"In that case I ought to start for River Heights," Nancy thought. But a feeling of suspicion about the whole thing overpowered her. It might be a trap. The telephone line could have been cut. One or more persons might try to capture her on the road.

"But why?" Nancy asked herself repeatedly. She came to the conclusion that the Hale Syndicate was back of the incident. They must have found out she had reported her suspicions to the police and somehow had learned where she was staying.

She turned to Mrs. Byrd and said, "I'll wait until seven o'clock, then try the phone again. If it still isn't working, I'll go to town and call Dad."

"Thank you, dear." Mrs. Byrd patted Nancy on the shoulder. "But don't go anywhere alone. Take Bess and George with you."

"I will."

Promptly at seven o'clock Nancy tried to get in touch with her father but the phone still was not working. Joanne was already up, but Nancy roused Bess and George. The three girls were astounded to learn about the note.

"We'll get breakfast in town," Nancy told Mrs. Byrd as she prepared to drive off with her friends. "And if I don't have to go to River Heights, I can do your shopping, too. Suppose you give me the list."

Halfway to town, George said suddenly, "Nancy, isn't your gasoline tank nearly empty?"

Nancy nodded. "I'm glad you reminded me. Watch for a station and we'll stop."

Presently Bess sighted one on the main road. "It's the same place we stopped to eat on our way to the farm," she said.

"So it is," George remarked.

"I can phone from here," Nancy decided.

She turned in at the gravel driveway, but as two other cars were ahead of her, she drew up some distance from the pump.

"How about getting breakfast here after you phone?" Bess suggested.

The girls agreed. Bess and George entered the lunchroom while Nancy went to an outdoor phone booth. She had her father on the wire in a few moments.

"Dad, did you send me a note last night?"

"Why, no."

Quickly his daughter explained her question. The lawyer said grimly, "It's plain to see someone wants to harm you in one way or another. Please be very careful."

Nancy promised and said, "Anyway, I'm glad you're all right."

After Nancy hung up, she dialed the phone company to report that the Byrd line was out of order. A few minutes later she joined Bess and George at a table and whispered the result of her conversation with Mr. Drew.

"Oh, Nancy, this means you're in danger!" Bess said worriedly.

"I thought at least I'd be safe at Red Gate Farm," Nancy said.

"I wonder," George muttered.

The girls were the only customers in the restaurant. No one came to wait on them. From an inner room, evidently used as an office, they could hear excited voices.

"Something's wrong," Nancy said to her companions.

Just then two men came out of the office in company with the gasoline-station attendant and the woman who served as waitress of the restaurant. The woman was talking excitedly.

"We found the twenty-dollar bill in the cash register at the end of the day. It looked like any other money, and we didn't suspect anything was wrong until John took the day's receipts to the bank. And of all things they said the bill was counterfeit and they'd have to turn it over to the Secret Service!"

"Yes," one of the agents spoke up, "we've just come from the bank and it's a counterfeit all right. There's been a lot of this bad money passed lately. The forgery is very clever."

"What am I going to do?" the woman cried. "We were cheated out of twenty dollars! It isn't fair to hard-working people like John and me. Aren't you Secret Service agents going to do something about it?"

"We're doing all we can," one of the men replied. "We don't have much to go on."

"It was a girl who gave me the bill," the woman explained. "There were several of them in the party. I'd recognize—Oh!" she shrieked. "There's the very girl!" She pointed an accusing

finger at Nancy Drew.

Nancy and her friends stared in astonishment. They could not believe what they had just heard.

"Arrest that girl!" the woman screamed. "Don't let any of them get away—they're all in on it together!"

"Just a minute," one of the agents said. "Suppose you explain," he suggested to Nancy.

The excited woman, however, was not to be calmed. She rushed toward Nancy and shook her fist at the girl. "Don't deny you gave me that phony bill!" she almost screamed.

"I neither deny nor affirm it," Nancy said, turning to the agents. "I did give the woman a twenty-dollar bill, but how do you know it was the counterfeit?"

"It was the only twenty we took in that day," the waitress retorted.

Nancy's thoughts raced. "I'll take your word for it," she said quietly.

Opening her purse she took out another twenty-dollar bill. The woman snatched the money and handed it to one of the Secret Service men. "Is this good?" she asked crisply.

The agent examined the bill. Then he looked at Nancy. "Where did you get this?"

"From my father. He gave me both bills, as a matter of fact. One was for car emergencies."

Instead of giving the bill to the woman, the man put it into his pocket. "This is serious business, young lady. The bill you just gave me is also counterfeit!"

Nancy was thunderstruck. Bess and George gasped. Before any of them could speak, the lunchroom woman cried out, "She's one of the gang! Arrest her!"

For the first time the station attendant spoke up. "Take it easy, Liz. These girls don't exactly look like counterfeiters."

Liz sniffed. "People don't usually go around paying for sundaes with twenty-dollar bills!" she said tartly.

"My father gave me the money because I was going on a vacation."

"A likely story!" the woman sneered.

"It's the truth!" George spoke up indignantly. "The idea of accusing my friend of passing bad money on purpose! It's ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous, is it?" the woman retorted angrily. "You'll sing a different tune when you're in jail!"

“You can’t have Nancy arrested. She didn’t realize it was counterfeit money!” Bess protested. “George and I have some cash. We’ll pay you twenty good dollars to make up for the bad one.”

As the cousins pooled their funds and handed over the money, the woman quieted down. “Maybe I was a little hasty,” she admitted. But she was not entirely cowed. “How about your father?” she asked Nancy. “How come he had counterfeit bills?”

Nancy said she did not know, but certainly he had not acquired them dishonestly.

One of the Secret Service men said, “Suppose you tell us who you are, and—”

“I’ll tell you who she is!” came an authoritative voice from the doorway.

CHAPTER XIII

A Hesitant Hitchhiker

UNOBSERVED by the girls, an automobile had driven up and parked near the filling station. A tall young man had alighted and started for the lunchroom. Upon hearing the amazing conversation inside, he had halted. Then, realizing Nancy was in need of help, he had stepped inside.

"Karl!" Nancy cried out. She had never before been so glad to see anyone!

"It looks as if I just got here in the nick of time." Karl Abbott Jr. smiled.

"They're trying to arrest us!" Bess exclaimed.

"You're kidding!" Karl cried in astonishment.

"It's no joke," Nancy returned earnestly, then told him of her predicament.

"Look here," Karl said bluntly, turning to the two Secret Service agents, "you can't hold these girls."

"Who are you?" one of the agents demanded.

"My name is Karl Abbott, and these girls are friends of mine. As it happens, my father is living at Red Gate Farm in Round Valley, where they also are staying. I was on my way there when I thought I'd stop for a bite to eat. Lucky I did, too!"

"These girls may be friends of yours," the unpleasant woman spoke up shrilly, "but this girl had better explain why she gave me counterfeit money!"

"If you're accusing these girls of deliberately trying to pass counterfeit money, you're crazy!" Karl Abbott cried out.

"You're willing to vouch for the honesty of this young lady's father as well?" the agent asked.

"Most definitely. This is Nancy Drew. No doubt you've heard of her father, the famous lawyer. If you haven't, you soon will!"

"Not Carson Drew of River Heights?"

"Yes," Karl replied.

"Why didn't you tell us who you were?" the restaurant owner asked.

"You didn't give me a chance to tell you anything!" Nancy retorted. "And you didn't seem ready to believe what I did have to say."

The two agents looked at each other. One asked to see Nancy's driver's license, then with a smile he said, "Too bad you have such a loss because of the counterfeit money. The outfit which is distributing the twenty-dollar bills is a clever one.

"The money is turning up in many places. I'll get in touch with your father to find out where he was given the bills. Incidentally, we understand a few women are mixed up in the racket. That's why we detained you."

"Let's get out of here!" George urged.

The girls hurriedly left the lunchroom with Karl. The government agents leisurely followed them outside.

As Nancy was about to step into her car, she thought of something. It occurred to her that by some remote chance the investigators might be interested in the phony message which she

had brought with her.

"This may or may not have anything to do with the case," she told them, handing over the scented note. "But the signature is a forgery, and the perfume has some mystery to it."

She gave a brief account of her own involvement with the mystery, beginning with her encounter on the train with the man who had mentioned "the Chief," and ending with the code.

"If the rest of the code can be deciphered," Nancy concluded, "that might give us the answer to everything, including the Hale Syndicate's whereabouts."

"So you're the young detective Chief McGinnis mentioned in his reports to us," one of the agents said admiringly. "What you've done so far is really astounding. Chief McGinnis didn't mention you by name. He probably figured you would prefer him not to.

"Your deductions seem very sound, Miss Drew, and I'd advise you to be careful. That Hale gang may think you know too much already. I'll take this note and pass it along to a handwriting expert. Perhaps Yvonne Wong was the person who delivered it."

Nancy shook her head. "From what I could see of the woman, I know she wasn't Yvonne."

After the agent had wished Nancy luck on the solution of the mystery, she said good-by to the men, and, with the others, went back to her car.

Although Karl Abbott was eager to continue on to Red Gate Farm to see his father, he expressed concern about the three girls and their upsetting experience. He asked for a detailed account of the events which had led to Nancy's predicament. He was most interested and sympathetic when the girls told him the whole story.

"Well," he said admiringly, "I guess I won't worry too much about you girls. You certainly aren't easily daunted by emergencies."

After Karl Jr. and the trio had exchanged good-bys, the young man got into his car and drove on to the farm.

Bess turned to her companions. "Where to? I'm more starved than ever."

"It's only a short way to town from here," Nancy replied. "We can get breakfast there and then do our shopping."

Soon the girls reached Round Valley. When they finished eating, Nancy looked at Mrs. Byrd's list.

"There's really not much on it," she commented. "Two of us could do the shopping. Suppose you girls take over and I'll go buy the material for our costumes."

"Material?" Bess queried.

Nancy laughed. "If we're going to join the Black Snake group in one of their rites, we'll need ghost costumes, and I've decided it wouldn't be fair to Mrs. Byrd to ruin four of her sheets and pillowcases."

Suddenly George said, "What are we going to use for money?"

Nancy had only two dollars. Bess and George between them counted six.

"That will pay for the meat and groceries," Bess said. "I guess our costume material and the other errands will have to wait."

The food shopping was soon finished and the girls returned to Red Gate Farm.

Joanne met them at the kitchen door. "Guess what?" she burst out. "The telephone repairman was here. He said our line had been cut!"

Nancy nodded. "By those people who were here last night."

"I suppose so. Oh, Nancy, I'm so worried for you. And Karl Jr. tells us you've had another adventure this morning. He said you'd explain."

Nancy, with lively interruptions from Bess and George, related the girls' recent experience.

"I gave those Secret Service men the note and told them the Hale Syndicate might be mixed up in some way with the counterfeiters. The syndicate may be the distributors of the phony

bills."

"Well, do let the authorities take care of it," Joanne urged. "I want you girls to have a good time while you're here."

"Oh, I'm having a wonderful time," Nancy assured her. "By the way, I think we should work on our costumes for the hillside ceremony. Could you repay us the money we spent today so I can buy more material? We decided it isn't fair to use your grandmother's good linens."

"Oh, yes, right away. I'll get it from Gram. And I think there are a few more groceries she needs."

Joanne returned in a few minutes and handed over the money to which she added enough for the marketing. Nancy headed for town. She had gone about a mile when she sighted a woman hurrying along the side of the country road. She was limping slightly.

"I'll offer her a ride," Nancy decided. "She seems to be in a great hurry."

She halted the car and called, "May I give you a lift to town?"

The woman glanced up, startled. Nancy was surprised to see that she was the woman from the Black Snake Colony whom she had helped several days before on the river trail! What she was doing so far from her camp Nancy did not know, but she was determined to make the most of the opportunity at hand.

"Please get in," Nancy urged, as the woman hesitated. "I'm sure your foot must be paining you. I notice that you are still limping."

"Thanks," the woman returned gratefully, hobbling over to the car door which Nancy held open for her. "I am in a hurry to get to town."

Before stepping inside she looked quickly over her shoulder as though fearing that someone might observe her actions.

She sighed in relief and settled back, looking very pale and exhausted.

"You weren't intending to walk all the way to town?" Nancy asked in a friendly, conversational tone.

The woman nodded. "I had to get there somehow."

"But aren't the members of your colony permitted to use any of the cars I've seen around the camp?" Nancy questioned, watching her companion closely and hoping that she might tactfully glean some information.

"We aren't allowed much freedom," the woman answered.

"You shouldn't be walking on that foot yet," Nancy protested. "You're apt to injure your ankle permanently."

"It's nearly well now," the woman told her, avoiding Nancy's eyes. "They didn't know at the camp that I was going to town. I—I left in a hurry."

Again the stranger cast an anxious glance over her shoulder. "She obviously thinks she's being followed," Nancy thought to herself. "Perhaps she's even running away!"

Nancy wanted to ask her companion a number of questions but the woman's aloofness discouraged her. Deciding on an entirely different course, the young sleuth pretended not to pay particular attention to the woman. For some time they drove along in silence. Nancy could see that her passenger was gradually relaxing and losing her fear.

"Am I going too fast for you?" Nancy inquired, thinking the time was right to launch the conversation.

"Oh, no," the woman returned quickly. "You can't go too fast for me." She hesitated, and then added, "I have an important letter to mail."

"Why don't you drop it in one of the roadside mailboxes?" Nancy suggested casually. "The rural carrier will pick it up and save you a long trip."

"I want to get it off this morning if I possibly can."

“I’ll be glad to gro to the post office and mail it for you,” Nancy said, purposely drawing the woman out.

“Thank you, but no,” the woman mumbled. “I—I’d feel better if I did it myself.” As Nancy did not reply, she said, “I don’t mean to be ungrateful for all you’ve done—really I don’t. It’s only that I mustn’t get you into trouble.”

“How could I get into trouble by helping you?” Nancy asked with a smile.

“You don’t understand,” her companion replied nervously. “There are things I can’t explain. The leaders of the colony will be very angry with me if they find I have left even for a few hours, and especially that I’ve mailed this letter to my sister. The cult forbids communication with the outside world.”

“I can’t understand why you tolerate such rigid supervision,” Nancy said impatiently. “Why, the leader of the cult must treat you as prisoners!”

“You’re not far from wrong,” the woman confessed.

“Then why don’t you run away?”

The question startled the woman. She glanced sharply at Nancy, then as quickly looked away.

“I would if I dared,” she said finally.

“Why don’t you dare?” Nancy challenged. “I’ll help you.”

“No, you mustn’t get mixed up in this. Perhaps later I can get away.”

“I don’t see what anyone can do to you if you decide to leave the colony,” Nancy went on. “Surely you’re a free person.”

“Not any more,” her companion returned sadly. “I’m in it too deep now. I’ll have to go on until Fate helps me.”

“I wouldn’t wait,” Nancy advised bluntly. “Let me help you—right now!”

CHAPTER XIV

Disturbing Gossip

THE strange woman in Nancy's car seemed to waver for a moment, as if about to accept the girl's offer of help. Then she shook her head.

"No, I won't drag you into it!" she said with finality. "You don't know what you'd be getting into if you helped me. Why, if they even learn that you've aided me in mailing this letter—"

Nancy saw the woman shudder. For one fleeting instant she, too, felt afraid—afraid of something she could not define.

The young sleuth realized that the woman was trying to warn her of danger. Nancy knew the wise thing to do was forget all about the nature cult and the strange things which apparently went on in the hillside cave. Yet, she felt that she was on the verge of discovering an important secret.

Nancy's companion was obviously relieved when the car rounded a bend and brought them within sight of town. "If you'll just drop me off at the post office, I'll be most grateful," the woman said.

"May I take you back with me?" Nancy asked. "I'll be returning in less than an hour."

"No, I'll walk back."

Nancy saw that it was useless to protest and let the matter rest. She made no comment.

After leaving her passenger in front of the post office, Nancy continued down the main street to the supermarket. Later, while she waited in the check-out line to pay for her groceries, two women took their places behind her. They were talking earnestly together, and did not pay any attention to Nancy. She, in turn, did not notice them until one of the shoppers began to speak on a startling subject.

"It beats me the way those people carry on," she heard one of them say. "You'd think Mrs. Byrd would turn them out!"

Instantly Nancy became alert.

"I suppose she needs the money," the other woman responded, "but someone should speak to her about it. The idea of those folks capering around in bedclothes! They must be crazy!"

"That's just what I think!" the first woman remarked. "If I lived near that farm I wouldn't feel safe! And I don't think it's decent for a law-abiding community like ours to have folks like that around. I'm going to get a big group together and call on Mrs. Byrd to tell her what we think of her!"

"I'll certainly join you," the woman said.

Nancy felt the situation was becoming serious; that the criticism of Mrs. Byrd would grow even sharper. If the two women carried out their threat, the consequences might be very unpleasant. Prospective Red Gate boarders might change their minds! The colony might take reprisals!

"One thing is certain," Nancy decided. "Our costumes must be ready by tonight in case the colony members have a meeting."

She paid for the groceries and went directly to the material shop, where she bought several yards of white muslin, then started for home.

Driving back to Red Gate Farm, Nancy kept a sharp lookout for the woman from the Black

Snake Colony, but she was nowhere along the road. “I wish I could have talked to her more. It might have helped in my plan to attend the ceremony.”

Joanne, Bess, and George were just returning from the woods with pails brimming over with luscious-looking berries when Nancy drove into the barnyard. As they started to help her carry in the packages, Karl Abbott Jr. rushed gallantly from the house to assist. He glanced curiously at the soft, fat one which Nancy kept tucked under her arm, but she did not give any explanation of its contents. Besides, the elder Mr. Abbott and Mrs. Salisbury were within hearing distance.

Immediately after a late lunch and some pleasant conversation with the guests, Nancy excused herself and summoned the other girls to her room. There she unwrapped the material and brought out scissors, needles, and thread.

“We must work like mad,” she said, “in case there’s a meeting tonight.”

With great excitement and anticipation she cut out the first costume which was to serve as an entering wedge to the nature-cult ceremonial. As Nancy worked, she told the story of her adventure with her passenger and the conversation of the women in the market.

Joanne was alarmed. “Oh, Gram must never hear of this!” she exclaimed. “She’d be heart-broken!”

The others agreed. “We won’t tell Mrs. Byrd any more than we have to,” George said. “I do hope we can solve the mystery before something ugly happens!”

For the next few hours their needles flew furiously. At last the costumes were finished. The four friends could not control their laughter as they tried them on.

“You certainly look as if you’re ready for Halloween!” George told Nancy.

“Do you think I’ll pass?”

“In the moonlight they won’t be able to tell you from a full-fledged member of the cult,” Bess declared. “Let’s see you go through the mystic rites.”

To the delight of her chums, Nancy danced around the room, waving her arms wildly and making weird moans.

“Jo!” a voice called. “Dinner’s ready!”

Startled, the girls scrambled out of the white robes and hastily hid them. They tried to compose their faces as they hurried downstairs, but merely succeeded in looking guilty.

“Seems to me you girls spent a long time locked up in your rooms.” Mrs. Salisbury sniffed suspiciously.

“Planning some kind of mischief, no doubt.” Mr. Abbott wagged his finger playfully at the four girls.

George had a hard time keeping a straight face, and hastily took a sip of milk. Bess could not restrain a giggle, whereupon Mrs. Salisbury gave her a sharp look.

“Humph!” she exclaimed. “I must say I’ll have to agree with Mr. Abbott this time. I’m sure you four *are* up to some prank.”

Even Nancy and Joanne had to smother tell-tale grins. They only smiled pleasantly, but offered no explanation.

Actually, the girls were so excited over their prospective adventure they could scarcely do justice to the excellent meal Mrs. Byrd had prepared. Karl Jr., as usual, was a charming companion.

He had many amusing anecdotes to tell, and Nancy was happy to observe that Joanne seemed to be enjoying it all immensely.

Indeed, by the time dessert was finished, Nancy and her chums realized that they had temporarily forgotten counterfeiters, syndicates, and even the nature cult on the hill.

Everyone was sorry, a little later, when the young man announced that he must leave.

“I wish I could stay,” he said regretfully, letting his eyes rest especially long on Nancy, “but I must get back to the city tonight. I’ll try to run down again in a few days to see Father. Take

care of yourselves," he added to the girls.

After Karl Jr. had gone, and the girls were washing the dishes, George said teasingly, "You can't tell me 'Father' is the only attraction at Red Gate Farm! He has his eye on Nancy!"

"Silly!" Nancy laughed.

"He scarcely took his eyes off you all evening," George insisted. "You made quite a hit this morning with that rescued-heroine bit."

"Oh, honestly, George!" Nancy blushed. "You never give up, do you?"

"Karl Jr. wouldn't be so bad," Bess added, "but imagine having Mr. Abbott for a father-in-law!"

"You do the imagining," Nancy said lightly. "I'm going outside and look at the hillside.".

All the girls watched until late in the evening, but the mysterious place remained dark and deserted. Disappointed, the girls went to bed.

They awakened early the next morning, for they had gradually become accustomed to farm hours. When they learned from Mrs. Byrd that Reuben was not feeling well, the girls eagerly helped with the various outdoor chores. It was noontime before they realized how much time had passed.

"You girls should have some relaxation this afternoon," Mrs. Byrd said. "How about a swim down in the brook? There's a spot that used to be known as the old swimming hole. It's fairly deep."

"That sounds wonderful," Bess declared.

Jo declined, but at two o'clock Nancy, Bess, and George set off in bathing suits. For two hours they swam, floated, and sun-bathed on the shore. Every once in a while Nancy or George would mention some angle of the colony, Hale Syndicate, or counterfeiting mysteries.

But immediately Bess would say, "Shush! We're relaxing. We may have a big night tonight."

Finally the girls started for the farmhouse. To reach it they had to cross a field in the corner of which lay a heap of large stones, apparently raked there when the acreage was cultivated.

George, grinning, climbed across the stones, saying, "This life is making me rugged. I—Oh, ouch!" she cried loudly, then added, "A snakel It bit me!"

CHAPTER XV

Masqueraders

NANCY and George turned just in time to see a brownish snake slither off in a wiggling motion and disappear among the stones.

"Oh, George!" Bess cried. "Was it a poisonous one?"

"I'm not sure," she answered, "I—I hope it wasn't a copperhead."

"We'd better not take any chances," Nancy declared, whipping a handkerchief from her beach robe. "Let's put on tourniquets, Bess."

Like lightning the two girls tied their handkerchiefs tightly above and below the puncture marks made in George's calf by the snake's fangs.

Then Nancy took a tiny pair of scissors from her bag. "I wish I had something to sterilize these with," she said.

"Will perfume do?" Bess asked, and took from her bag the tiny bottle of Blue Jade.

The liquid was poured onto the scissors, then Nancy deftly made a crosscut incision near the punctures. Blood spurted out, and with it, she hoped, any serum the snake might have injected.

George stoically had not made a sound, but finally she said, "Thanks, girls. Your quick first aid probably made it possible for me to go to the ceremonies tonight—if they have them."

"I think you'd better not step on your foot, or stimulate circulation," Nancy advised. "Suppose Bess and I carry you."

George started to protest but finally consented. Seated on a "chair" made by the intertwined hands of Nancy and Bess, George was carried toward the farmhouse.

The trip, though awkward and slow, went at a steady pace. George maintained her Spartan attitude. She not only refused to complain but teasingly asked Bess, "Aren't you glad I don't eat as much as you do?"

"I don't know what you mean," Bess replied, puzzled.

"Well, if I loved desserts as you do," George teased, "I wouldn't be such a featherweight to carry!"

Bess gave her cousin an indignant glance. "How do you like that for gratitude! Next time I lug you all the way home—!"

Nancy interrupted with a grin, "I guess we all do our share of eating dessert. Anyhow, we've made it, girls. Red Gate Farm is just ahead!"

As they came up to the house, Mrs. Salisbury, who was in the garden, exclaimed, "Oh, gracious! What happened?" Mr. Abbott and Mrs. Byrd hurried from the house.

"Just a precautionary measure," Nancy explained, and told of the snake incident.

George was carried indoors and laid on a couch. Mrs. Byrd quickly called the family physician. He arrived shortly, and examined George's wound.

The doctor nodded approvingly as he bathed it with an antiseptic and removed the tourniquets.

"Excellent first-aid treatment," he announced. "You'll be fine, young lady. I'd advise you to rest for several hours."

"Thank you. That's good news." George gave a relieved grin.

For the remainder of the afternoon she was made to lie inactive. When dinnertime came, George got up, declaring, "I never felt better!"

"But take it easy in case we go out tonight," Nancy pleaded with her.

To allay suspicion on the part of the other boarders, Bess and Joanne were posted as guards across the road. If they saw the beginning of rites on the hill, the girls were to give birdcalls. In the meantime, Nancy and George waited in George's room, the costumes ready to be picked up at a moment's notice.

Suddenly Nancy leaped from her chair and flew into her own bedroom. "What's eating you?" George called.

"Oh, why didn't I think of it before? How stupid of me!" Nancy said, returning with a piece of paper in her hand.

"What *are* you talking about?" George demanded.

"That snake today. The way he wriggled. It looked just like the mark over the numeral 2 in the coded message!" Nancy cried excitedly. "The 2 we think means B!"

George sat up. "You mean the B with the wavy line over it might signify the Black Snake Colony?"

"Yes. Oh, George, this connects the Hale Syndicate with the nature cult here. Now the message reads: "Maurice Hale calling Black Snake Colony meeting—"

"And the 18. How about that?" George asked.

"Not too hard to guess, George. The 18 is the letter R, and could stand for Red Gate Farm."

"Nancy, you're a whiz, as I've often told you," her friend declared.

The young sleuth smiled, then said wistfully, "If I could only have had another second to copy the next few numbers, I might have known the exact time."

"What happens now? Will you notify the police?"

At that instant Nancy and George heard soft birdcalls. "No time to phone now," Nancy said.

She grabbed two of the costumes and dashed from the room. George followed with the others. As prearranged, the girls left by the kitchen door to avoid the boarders. Mrs. Byrd had been told that the girls might go up the hillside to watch if the nature cult put on a performance.

Nancy and George joined the other girls and they all scurried toward the woods. It was very dark beneath the dense canopy of trees, and Bess gripped Nancy's arm. Joanne was familiar with every path and led the way toward the hillside.

A weird cry broke the stillness. Involuntarily the girls halted and moved closer together.

"What—was—that?" Bess chattered.

"Only some wild animal," Nancy reassured her. "Come on!" she urged. "We must hurry or we'll miss the ritual!"

The girls went through the dark forest as fast as they could. The moon was rising, and ghostly rays of light filtered through gaps in the foliage overhead. A faint breeze stirred the leaves into what seemed like menacing whispers. The girls finally reached the river trail and followed it.

"We must be careful now," Nancy warned in a low voice. "We're drawing near the colony. The cult may have a lookout stationed during the night ceremonies."

"I hadn't thought of that," Joanne murmured.

"I almost wish I hadn't come," Bess whispered nervously. "I had no idea it would be this dark."

"What were you expecting at nine-thirty at night?" George chided in as low a tone as possible.

“It will be lighter when the moon rises higher,” Joanne told her. “Still—if you want to turn back—”

“No, I’m going through with this masquerade if the rest of you are!” Bess retorted stalwartly.

Nancy hoped fervently it would remain a masquerade. She was firmly convinced now that the Black Snake group were unscrupulous people working with, or at least friendly with Maurice Hale. Nancy now felt convinced that the mystic rites were nothing but a sham.

Fortunately, for Nancy’s purpose, the hillside was covered with large rocks as well as dense shrubs which would provide temporary hiding places. As the girls stole cautiously up the steep path, they could see cult members still congregating.

“We’re in plenty of time,” she thought.

The girls separated, George and Bess crouching behind a huge rock. Joanne and Nancy took cover behind a heavy growth of shrubs and tall grass.

For nearly ten minutes the girls watched as figures milled about the hillside. Then they heard the sound of cars approaching.

“They must be coming up through the pasture again,” Joanne said, listening intently.

An instant later she and Nancy saw the headlights of three automobiles.

“Look!” Joanne tugged at Nancy’s sleeve. “More members are coming out of their tents!”

The two girls watched the white-robed figures walking slowly toward the brow of the hill, where the three automobiles had parked.

“I wonder if one of the newcomers is Maurice Hale,” Nancy thought.

She and Joanne were too far away to hear what was being said, but they could see distinctly. They watched as a group of men and women, twelve in number, stepped from the cars. Nancy could not distinguish any of their faces.

The new arrivals quickly donned white garments and headgear similar to the outfits Nancy and her friends had made, then joined the other members of the cult.

The ghostly figures soon began dancing about in the moonlight, and Nancy felt that the time was right for her daring attempt to join the group. Before she could tell Joanne, there was a slight stir in the bushes directly behind her.

Involuntarily Nancy jumped, fully expecting to come face to face with one of the cult members. Instead, Bess and George emerged.

“Isn’t it about time for us to do something?” they asked, almost simultaneously.

“Yes,” Nancy agreed, “we’d better get into our robes as quickly as we can.”

The girls were well hidden by the rocks and bushes. They donned their costumes and pulled the headgear over their faces. For the first time, Nancy noticed the scent of Blue Jade on Bess. “I wonder if that was wise,” Nancy thought. “If it attracts attention to Bess it might increase her danger, but it’s too late now to do anything about it.”

As George, overeager, started off, Nancy caught her friend’s arm. “Wait!” she warned. “We must slip quietly into the circle one at a time.”

“My knees are shaking now,” Bess admitted. “I don’t know how I’ll be able to dance.”

“Stay here if you like,” Nancy told her. “I think we should leave someone to keep guard, anyway.”

“I’ll stay,” Joanne offered. “I know the way back through the woods better than you girls do.”

“Come on!” George pleaded. “If we don’t hurry we’ll be too late!”

“Good luck!” Joanne whispered as the girls crept away.

Inch by inch, the three girls made their way up the hill. They crouched behind a clump of bushes a stone’s throw from where the cult members were dancing. Nancy indicated that she would make the first move. Bess and George nodded.

“The slightest mistake will mean detection!” Nancy thought, her heart pounding.

Waiting for the right moment, she suddenly slipped out among the white-robed figures and instantly began waving her arms and making grotesque motions.

CHAPTER XVI

Startling Commands

RELIEVED that her entry into the group had not been noticed, Nancy marched along with the other ghostly figures. If only George and Bess were as successful!

Nancy watched her disguised companions and saw that the girls would have no trouble in following the motions, since each person was apparently making them up on the spur of the moment.

"So far, so good," Nancy told herself.

Satisfied now that her own position was temporarily secure, she tried to help her friends. Deliberately moving toward the shrubs behind which George and Bess were hiding, she shielded them from the view of the cult members, all the time continuing her grotesque motions.

George realized what the young sleuth was trying to do and made the most of the opportunity. Choosing her time, she slipped out and joined the group on the hillside.

Bess was more timid. Several times at the critical moment she lost her nerve, but she finally managed to summon enough courage and made the plunge.

"Keep close together," Nancy warned in an undertone. "If we lose each other, it may be disastrous."

By this time the girls had made up their minds that there was nothing the least bit mystic about the queer rites of the Black Snake Colony. Disguised persons on all sides of them were making crude remarks which assured the girls that the cult members did not take the ceremony seriously.

"This ought to give the country yokels an eye-full" Nancy heard one man mutter.

"How much longer do we have to do this?" another grumbled. "I'm getting sick of flapping my arms around like a windmill!"

"This cult idea was all foolishness, anyway!" still another said.

"Foolishness, is it?" someone caught him up. Nancy thought she recognized the voice but was not certain. "Let me tell you a girl was prowling around here only a few days ago! I guess the Chief knew his business when he thought up this crazy cult idea."

"Well, enough of this!" a loud voice announced. Nancy decided the man must be one of the leaders. "We may as well go into the cave and get down to business!"

George was just wondering what the girls had better do when Bess clutched Nancy's hand and whispered nervously:

"Do we dare enter?"

"We must," Nancy returned quietly.

The girls stood motionless, watching the white-robed figures march single file toward the entrance to the cave. Finally Nancy signaled, and the three friends followed the group, even though it occurred to them that they might be walking into a trap.

"Keep close behind me," Nancy warned her companions in a whisper.

As they approached the mouth of the opening, Nancy saw a tall figure, robed in white, standing guard. Her heart nearly stopped as she realized that each person was uttering some password.

"We're finished now," she thought.

It was too late to turn back. The three girls could do nothing but hope that in some way they might get past the stalwart guard.

Nancy kept close to the person just ahead of her, and as he muttered the password, she managed to hear it.

"Kamar!"

When Nancy's turn came to pass the guard, she spoke the word clearly. As she had hoped, George and Bess heard, and taking their cue from her, repeated the password. The sentry did not give them a second glance, yet the girls breathed easier when they were safely through the entrance.

The marchers descended into a cold, damp tunnel. Someone was carrying a torch at the head of the procession, but Nancy and her friends, who were near the end of the line, were in semidarkness.

"What do you suppose we're getting into?" George muttered.

Nancy did not reply, but gave her friend a sharp nudge as a warning not to speak. A moment later Bess tripped over some object in the path and would have fallen if Nancy had not caught her by the arm. They walked farther underground, and then, unexpectedly, stepped into a dimly lighted chamber.

The members of the cult seated themselves on the floor, and the girls followed their example. Presently they became aware of the strong scent of Blue Jade perfume. Bess was not the only one wearing it tonight!

"So there is a definite connection between this distinctive perfume and the Black Snake Colony!" Nancy thought. "No wonder that man on the train was startled. Perhaps the women use it, and he couldn't identify me but took it for granted I was one of the group. If so, it's just as well Bess has some on."

Nancy suddenly recalled the forged note bearing the Blue Jade scent. "The woman who delivered it to me must be a member of the cult!" she thought excitedly.

After everyone had entered the room, the man who had given the sharp order outside the cave spoke again. He threw off his headgear and glanced over the group appraisingly. Nancy was stunned.

Maurice!

The man she had seen the first time she had stopped at the filling station!

"Is he Maurice Hale?" she asked herself excitedly.

"Everyone here?" he demanded gruffly.

He counted the group, and again Nancy and her friends held their breaths. Apparently some of the members of the colony were missing, for the leader did not notice that three new recruits had been added to his organization.

"We may as well get down to work," the leader announced. "Snead, have you anything to report?"

At the question one of the disguised persons stood up and threw off his mask. Again Nancy was startled. He was none other than the man she had seen in Room 305!

"Here's the good money," he said, handing over an envelope. "Perfect score this time for our main distribution department."

"Very fine. Then nothing's gone wrong at your new office?"

"Not yet, Chief," was the muttered reply, "but yesterday I saw a bird hangin' around the building—looked like a plain-clothes cop to me. I don't want you to think I'm backing out, but if you ask me, I'd say it's about time to blow. This game can't last forever, you know."

"I'll do the thinking for this outfit!" the leader scathingly retorted. "We'll stay here another week and then pick a new spot. What makes you think the cops are wise?"

"Well, they may have got wise to the fact that we're using Yvonne again—"

“That’s right!” a shrill, angry female voice interrupted. “Blame me! Every time somebody gets nervous, you bring me into it!”

Nancy could scarcely restrain herself. She had been right about Yvonne! The girl was mixed up in the Hale Syndicate racket!

“You deserve blame,” A1 Snead retorted irritably. “First, you didn’t have any more sense than to sell a bottle of that perfume to a perfect stranger—”

“I told you, that girl insisted upon buying it, and I was afraid if I flatly refused, she and her friends would get suspicious. Besides, I don’t see what harm it did to sell the perfume to a teenager!”

“No,” Snead retorted sarcastically, “you’re so simple-minded you wouldn’t see it might land us in jail! When Pete was on the train going to River Heights he noticed the scent and thought that the girl was one of the Chief’s agents! Lucky for all of us, he saw his mistake before he spilled anything!”

Yvonne sputtered back in defense. “Well, at least I phoned Al at his office right away so he could warn the agents about the stray bottle of Blue Jade. It’s not my fault Pete happened to be on the same train as those girls.”

The leader suddenly became impatient. “Enough of this!” he shouted. “It’s not getting us anywhere! Snead, I placed Yvonne in your office and she’ll stay there as long as I say. I’m satisfied with the rest of her work. Get me?”

Snead nodded sullenly.

Nancy had been studying the leader intently and by this time was convinced that he was far more clever and intelligent than his subordinates. She figured that Al Snead was right-hand man to the Chief, but resented his superior’s favoritism toward Yvonne Wong. The organization was a large one, evidently changing its scene and type of operation from time to time. If only she could slip away and get help from the authorities!

“Another thing,” Al Snead continued, addressing Maurice Hale, “we’d better make up a new code. Those girls that have been gettin’ too close to our operation just might notify the cops.”

“All right,” the Chief responded. “I’ll work one out in a day or two.”

He called on another member of the organization for a report. “Two hundred packages passed, sir.”

“Good!” the leader exclaimed, rubbing his thin hands. “Now, if you’ll follow me to the workroom, I’ll give you each your cut, and dole out the stuff for next week.”

Nancy and her friends could not have retreated had they wished, and certainly did not want to leave when they seemed so near the truth!

But the situation in which they found themselves was a foreboding one and the very atmosphere of the room was tense and frightening. Boldly they followed the others into an adjoining chamber which was brilliantly lighted with torches.

Though prepared for the unexpected, the girls were taken completely aback at the sight which greeted their eyes!

CHAPTER XVII

Tense Moments

NANCY'S first impression on entering was that the chamber appeared to be a cross between a printing shop and a United States mint.

"Counterfeiters!" she thought excitedly.

Hand presses stood about and several engraved plates had been left on a table. Various chemicals and inks were in evidence. Neat stacks of paper money lined one wall and other bills were scattered carelessly on the floor. Never in all her life had Nancy seen so much money!

The room was cluttered with it. Twenty-dollar bills appeared to be everywhere. Money, still damp, was drying on tables. Nancy observed that all the bills seemed to be of the twenty-dollar denomination.

At last she had the answer to the many questions which had been troubling her! This was the secret of the cave! The latest racket of the Hale Syndicate! The nature cult was a hoax, its so-called mysterious rites used only as a screen to hide the work of a clever band of counterfeiters! The Black Snake Colony seemed to her to be a perfect name.

Nancy realized that if she did not try to get away and bring help now, she and her friends would fail. There was nothing they could do by themselves.

Nancy turned to relay her intentions to Bess and George. A slight tug on their robes was all that was needed to make them understand, but to put the plan into operation was another matter.

The girls attempted to edge toward the chamber entrance by degrees, but Al Snead stood barring the door. For the time being escape was out of the question. They must bide their time.

As long as some members of the organization remained masked, the girls knew they would be comparatively safe. But already several people had stripped off their robes and headpieces. Every minute that the girls' escape was delayed increased the danger of detection.

Since it was impossible to sneak away, Nancy made careful note of her surroundings and tried to identify the faces on her mind. Except for Yvonne, the leader Maurice Hale, Al Snead, and the man she had seen on the train, all were strangers. Six people besides Bess, George, and herself remained masked.

As Nancy surveyed the elaborate equipment in the workroom, she realized that this was an unusually large gang of counterfeiters. The engraved plate which had been copied from an actual United States Government twenty-dollar bill was a work of art. Probably the leader of the gang had at one time been noted as a skilled engraver and had decided to use his talents to unlawful advantage.

Nancy carefully glanced about the room. Maurice Hale was looking over some stacks of counterfeit money while several members of the gang talked quietly. Bess and George automatically followed Nancy's gaze but stood perfectly still next to her near the table.

Nancy, under ordinary circumstances, could not have told the counterfeit money from the real thing-with the picture of Jackson on the face, and the White House on the back. But now that she had been alerted to examine the bills carefully, she noted that the color and texture of the paper appeared to be at fault.

When Nancy felt sure that she was not being observed, she stealthily picked up one of the bills and tucked it inside her robe as evidence.

“We made a pretty fair week’s profit,” Maurice Hale said gruffly as he stacked the bills into several large piles. You distributors and passers keep up like this for another month and I’d say we’ll all be on Easy Street.”

“The racket won’t last another month,” Al Snead growled. “I tell you, the federal agents are getting wise that the phony stuff’s being passed around here.”

“Bah!” Hale replied contemptuously. “Let them be suspicious! They wouldn’t think of this out-of-the-way place as our headquarters in a thousand years!”

Nancy could not help but smile at his words. “That’s what he thinks!”

The next voice that spoke startled Nancy. She recognized it instantly as belonging to Mr. Kent —the would-be buyer of Red Gate Farm!

“Yeah, maybe not,” he was saying. “Still, it’s too bad the old lady wouldn’t sell her place. Then we’d really have a setup!”

It flashed through Nancy’s mind that her hunch had been right about Mr. Kent being involved with the hillside cult. No wonder they wanted to obtain Red Gate Farm; it would have been a better headquarters for the gang than the cave.

The girl detective strained her ears as the conversation continued. A woman next to Kent said scornfully, “I only hope your bright idea about that fake letter we took to the Drew girl, and cutting the farm telephone wires, doesn’t backfire.”

So, Nancy told herself, it was Kent, and the woman who had just spoken, who were the ones responsible for that part of the mystery. Mr. Kent also was undoubtedly the driver of the car which had slowed down one evening near the farmhouse.

Meanwhile, the leader went on deftly stacking the money. Nancy and her friends watched him with increasing uneasiness. When the various members of the organization were called upon to accept their share of the counterfeit bills, they would doubtless remove their masks. How would the girls escape detection then?

Nancy realized the situation was becoming more serious. She and her friends must escape before the actual distribution of the money began. If only Al Snead would move away from the door!

One thought comforted Nancy. Joanne was on guard outside the cave. If worst came to worst and escape was cut off, Joanne undoubtedly would become alarmed and hurry back to the farmhouse for help.

“We may have to make a dash for it!” Nancy warned George in a whisper. “If that man moves away from the door, be ready!”

Al Snead did not move, however, and it seemed to the girls that he was watching them. They wondered if their whispering had made him suspicious.

Bess trembled slightly, and moved nearer Nancy. Maurice Hale had finished counting the money, and, glancing over the assembly, announced in a commanding voice:

“Well, those of you who haven’t removed your masks had better do it one by one. I want to be sure no one is here who shouldn’t be!” He pointed to Bess. “You first!”

Nancy and her friends felt themselves go cold. They were trapped! There was nothing they could do now but make a wild dash for safety.

“Ready!” Nancy muttered under her breath.

Before the girls could put their ideas into action, they were startled by a loud commotion in the tunnel. An instant later the guard, who had been stationed at the entrance of the cave, burst into the chamber. He was half dragging a young girl who fought violently to free herself.

The victim was Joanne!

CHAPTER XVIII

Prisoners

NANCY'S first impulse was to dash forward and try to help Joanne. But instantly she realized the foolishness of such an act. George half started toward Joanne, but Nancy restrained her.

"Wait!" she whispered tensely.

If the situation had been grave before, it was even more serious now. With Joanne captured there was no one to go for help! The girls must depend entirely on themselves to escape from the cave. No one at the farmhouse knew that they were doing anything more than watching the Black Snake Colony from a safe distance.

"Let me go!" Joanne cried, struggling to free herself.

"Where did she come from?" Maurice Hale demanded unpleasantly.

"I saw her hiding among the bushes," the guard informed him. "She was spying! But she got just a little too curious!"

"Spying, eh?" A harsh expression crossed the leader's face. "Well, we know what to do with snoopers!"

"It's all a mistake," Joanne murmured, on the verge of tears. "I didn't mean any harm. I'm Mrs. Byrd's granddaughter and I was merely curious to know more about the cult."

Even as Joanne spoke, her eyes traveled about the room, noting the stacks of money and the queer printing presses. She tried not to show that she understood their significance, but it was too late. The leader had seen her startled expression.

"So?" he drawled smartly. "This time your curiosity has been the means of getting you into serious trouble. You'll learn, by the time we get through with you, not to meddle in affairs that don't concern you!" He turned quickly to Snead. "Al, see that no one leaves this room!"

"Yes, Chief," the guard answered.

Nancy wondered what he had in mind. Just then Maurice Hale continued in a cold, harsh voice:

"Just to make sure that other spies haven't been pulling a fast one on us, I'll have everyone remove his mask at once. Be mighty quick about it too!"

"No!" Bess whimpered aloud. Then, realizing what she had done, she covered her mouth and sank back against the wall.

All heads turned in her direction. Nancy and her friends had deliberately delayed in removing their masks, but now Nancy knew their effort to gain time was doomed.

With Al Snead still blocking the door, things looked black. Most of the others already had stripped off their headgear.

In addition to Maurice Hale and Al Snead, Nancy immediately recognized Yvonne Wong and Pete, the man who had spoken to her on the train. Next she spotted Mr. Kent, and finally, the woman with the upswept hairdo who had brought her the faked letter.

"That woman's the same one I saw at the service station with the three men," Nancy thought. "If she hadn't changed her hair style, I might have recognized her the night she delivered the note."

The other unmasked members were strangers to Nancy. Tensely now she watched as the leader stood before Bess.

“Nothing to be afraid of, dear,” he said, and gently lifted off the ghostly head covering. The next instant Maurice Hale practically shrieked, “A spy!”

His face contorted with rage, Maurice snatched the white cloth headpieces from George’s face, then Nancy’s. Their scheme was exposed to all the members of the counterfeit gang!

For an instant there was stunned silence, then angry cries arose from the Black Snake Colony members.

“They’re the ones who bought the Blue Jade perfume from me!” Yvonne Wong shrieked.

Al Snead glared at Nancy. “Yeah. I knew something was wrong when you came into the office wearin’ the Blue Jade. I smelled it, but didn’t let on.”

He then pointed accusingly toward Joanne. “That girl is the one who applied at our city office for a job! When she told me who she was and where she was from I knew she was the last person in the world we’d want to hire!”

“That crazy idea of yours about someone with farm experience,” the leader cried. “We didn’t need anybody to talk to our agents about cows and chickens—”

“But this place *is* in the country,” Al Snead defended himself. “And in our codes we use a lot of that kind of lingo.”

“Silence!” Maurice yelled, and turned to Joanne. “So you thought you’d get a job at our office and spy on us! And your meddling friend Nancy Drew was in cahoots with you.”

“No, oh no!” Joanne cried out. “It was only by accident. I wanted to find a job and help my grandmother. Nancy was just trying to help me locate the office—”

“Don’t expect us to believe a trumped-up story like that,” the leader said harshly. “We know all about why you two have been snooping around ever since Al had Pete trail you from Riverside Heights. What’s more, we know how to deal with such people!”

Hale turned menacingly to Nancy. “You’ll wish you’d taken Pete’s advice when he called your pal”—he indicated George—“and warned her that you’d better mind your own business.”

“Oh, Maurice, please don’t be too harsh with the girls,” a timid voice pleaded. “They didn’t mean any harm.” As she finished, the speaker removed her mask.

Nancy turned quickly to see the woman she had helped in the woods and later had taken to town.

“So she’s a counterfeiter!” Nancy told herself incredulously. “I can’t believe it!”

“Didn’t mean any harm?” Maurice drawled sarcastically. “Oh, no, of course not. They only wanted to land the whole Hale Syndicate in jail! Not that you would care! If I had known what a whiner you are, I’d never have married you! Mind your own business and let me take care of this!”

In spite of the seriousness of her own situation, Nancy felt pity for the woman. Undoubtedly as the wife of such a tyrant as Maurice Hale she had stayed with him against her will. She had hated the life that he had forced her to lead, but evi dently she had been powerless to escape from it.

“No wonder the poor woman took a chance and slipped away from time to time,” Nancy thought.

Frightened by the harsh words of her husband, Mrs. Hale moved back into a far corner of the room. Nancy wished she could help her in some way, but realized that the woman dared not say more.

“What’ll we do with these girls?” the leader demanded. “We can’t let’em go. They know too much!”

On all sides angry mutterings arose. Yvonne Wong heartlessly proposed that the girls be tied up and left prisoners in the cave. But Maurice Hale ruled down that suggestion.

“We’ll have to get ‘em out of here,” he said. “They’ll be missed and a searching party might visit this joint. How about the shack at the river? It’s in such a desolate spot no one would

think of looking there until after—"

He did not finish the sentence, but from the sinister expression on his face, Nancy and her friends guessed his meaning. He intended to lock them up in the cabin and leave them without food!

A cry of anguish came from the leader's wife. Rushing forward, she clutched her husband frantically by the arm.

"Oh, Mauricel You couldn't be that cruell"

Mr. Hale flung her away from him with a force that sent the woman reeling against the wall. She uttered a little moan of pain and sank to the floor.

"Oh!" Bess screamed.

Even the cult members were startled.

"Be quiet!" ordered their chief.

The cruel action aroused Nancy. For an instant all eyes were centered on the woman, and Nancy thought she saw her opportunity. Quick as a flash she made a rush for the exit. Bess and George, equally alert, darted after her.

Al Snead, who stood in the opening, was taken completely by surprise. He tried to hold his ground but the girls were too strong for him. He managed to detain Bess and George, but Nancy wriggled from his grasp. She hesitated when she saw her friends had failed.

"Go on, Nancy!" Bess shrieked. "You must escape!"

Nancy darted into the next room, while George and Bess struggled with their captor, trying to block the door and give their friend more time.

"Stop that girl!" Maurice Hale shouted angrily. "If you let her get away, I'll—"

Nancy plunged into the tunnel and was swallowed up by darkness. She ran for her life and for the lives of her friends, realizing this probably was her only chance.

The long white robe hindered her, but there was no time to tear it off. She held it high above her knees. Once she stumbled, but caught herself, and rushed on frantically.

"Go on, Nancy!" Bess shrieked,
"You must escape!"

The tunnel seemed to have no end. Behind her, Nancy could hear pounding footsteps and angry shouts. She thought the men must be gaining. If only she could reach the mouth of the cavel

The tunnel wound in and out and several times Nancy brushed against the rough stone

wall. The route was so circuitous that she began to think she had taken a wrong turn.

Then, just as she was giving up hope, Nancy spotted a dim light far ahead and knew she must be nearing the mouth of the cave. No one appeared to be left guarding the entrance. Her only chance! In a moment more she had reached the open air.

“Saved!” Nancy breathed.

At that instant a dark figure loomed up from the grass. Nancy felt a heavy hand on her shoulder!

CHAPTER XIX

Destroyed Evidence

"NOT so FAST there!" The man leered as he clutched Nancy firmly by the arm and whirled her around. "What's the big rush, anyway?"

Nancy, staring into his hard face, saw that he was the man who had been addressed as "Hank," one of the three men she had seen at the filling station. Frantically she struggled to free herself.

"So—" he muttered in satisfaction, "the pretty blond spy the boys were telling me about. I thought you were warned by the guard to keep away from here! This time, I take it, you're lookin' for something besides a stray cow!"

"Yes, and I'm going to find it!" Nancy said bravely.

"Oh, yeah? You're going to find what? The police?" Hank looked at her costume. "You're a spy. But your little game is up."

Nancy's pulse was racing. How could she get away? She could hear running footsteps coming through the tunnel, and knew her chance of escape would be over in another instant. In desperation she tried to jerk herself free from Hank. But her captor gripped her more securely and laughed as she cried out in pain.

"Let me go!"

Nancy twisted and squirmed, but her efforts only made Hank tighten his grip. By the time the others reached her, she had given up the struggle and stood quietly waiting for the worst to come.

"Good thing you got her, Hank," Maurice Hale called. "The little wildcat! We'll give her a double dose for this smart trick! No girl's going to put anything over on me!"

At the entrance of the cave it was nearly as bright as day, for the moon was high. Maurice Hale glanced nervously about, as though fearing observation by unseen eyes.

"Get back inside!" he sharply ordered his followers. "It's a clear night and some wise bird might see us without our costumes and wonder what's up. We must destroy the evidence as quickly as we can and clear out of this place!"

Even as the leader spoke, Nancy thought she heard a rustling in the nearby bushes. She told herself that it probably was only the wind stirring the leaves. Rescue was out of the question, for no one knew that she and her friends had planned such a dangerous mission. How foolish of them not to have revealed their full plans to someone!

Nancy made no protest as she was dragged back into the cavern. Bravely she tried to meet the eyes of her friends, for she saw that they were even more discouraged than she. Poor Bess was trembling with fright.

"Th-the perfume did it!" she wailed. "I knew this masquerade was far too dangerous for us to try!"

"Cheer up," Nancy whispered encouragingly. "We'll find some way to get out of here!"

Bess only shook her head. She was not to be deceived.

"And to think *I* was the one who couldn't wait for a spooky adventure on the hillside," George moaned regretfully. "I really ought to have my head examined!"

The members of the syndicate were furious. There would be no second opportunity for these intruders to break away. At an order from the leader, Al Snead found several pieces of

rope and bound Nancy and her friends hand and foot. He seemed to take particular delight in making Nancy's bonds cruelly tight.

"I guess that'll hold you for a while." He grinned, gloating over the girls' predicament.

"Get to work!" the leader commanded his men impatiently. "Do you think we have the rest of the night? If we don't hurry up and get out of here, the cops are apt to be down on us! Don't know what this girl's done."

All colony members, except Mrs. Hale, went to work with a will; the fear of the law obviously had affected them. With a sinking heart, Nancy realized the men planned to destroy all the evidence of their counterfeiting operations.

"The machines that we can't take with us well wreck," Maurice Hale ordered. "If we save the plates we can start up again in a new place. Get a move on!"

He stood over the men, driving them furiously. His wife had slumped down in a chair and had buried her face in her hands. She appeared crushed. Only once did she summon her energy to speak.

"Maurice," she murmured brokenly, "why won't you give up this dreadful life—always running from the police? We were happy before you got mixed up with such bad company."

Her husband cut her short with a sarcastic remark. She did not try to speak again, but sat hunched over, looking sorrowfully at the girls. Nancy knew that she wanted to help them, but did not have the courage for further defiance.

The work of destroying the counterfeiting machinery went on, but several times Maurice Hale glanced impatiently at his watch.

"No use waiting until we're through here," he observed after a time. "Let's get the prisoners out of here pronto. The sooner we're rid of them, the safer I'll feel. Al, you start on ahead with one of the automobiles. You know the way to the shack, don't you?"

"Sure," Al Snead agreed promptly.

"Then take Hank along to keep guard and get going!"

Nancy and her chums were jerked to their feet. The cords around their ankles were removed to permit them to walk, but their arms were kept tied securely behind them.

"Move along!" Al Snead ordered Nancy, giving her a hard shove forward.

The girls stumbled along through the dark passageway from the inner room to the mouth of the cave. Men and women followed them with angry, menacing threats.

Al and Hank pushed the girls to make them hurry. Nancy and her friends exchanged hopeless glances from time to time. George held her head up contemptuously, but Joanne was white as a sheet and Bess was on the verge of tears.

"Guess this'll teach you girls to mix with the Black Snake Colony!" a raucous voice said as the group made its way toward the exit.

Nancy held back a retort, but her icy look told the man she did not appreciate the remark. Their walk seemed interminable. Finally, however, moonlight could be seen. In a moment they were approaching the mouth of the cave.

Nancy took a few halting steps and then paused as if she had turned to stone. Her eyes were riveted upon the entrance. There stood Mr. Abbott's son, Karl jr.!

"Oh, Karl!" Nancy cried out. "These men are counterfeiters! Don't let them capture you tool Run!"

CHAPTER XX

A Final Hunch

KARL ABBOTT did not run. Instead, he signaled with his hand. At once seven armed men sprang from the darkness of nearby bushes.

"Secret Service agents," Karl explained quickly to the girls.

"Stand where you are! Don't anyone move!" ordered one of the federal men.

So unexpected was their arrival that the counterfeiters were stunned. For an instant no one moved. Then, with a cry of rage, Maurice Hale darted into the cavern. He had taken only a few steps when one of the other agents grabbed him, firmly by one arm.

"None of that! We have you right this time, Hale. You won't try any funny stuff with Uncle Sam again!"

Some of the counterfeiters who had not yet come from the cavern had turned back,

"They'll get away through the other exit!" Nancy cried out.

Karl smiled. "We have that covered too."

He now introduced the four girls to Secret Service Agent Horton who was in charge of the group. The federal man gave Nancy Drew a quick word of praise for revealing the headquarters of the counterfeiting ring.

"Outwitted—by that snooping kid!" Maurice Hale screamed.

The thought seemed to unnerve the man completely. He did not protest when handcuffs were put on his wrists. Other members of the syndicate submitted to the agents without resistance, although Yvonne Wong vehemently protested her innocence.

"I didn't know what it was all about until tonight," she cried angrily. "It isn't fair to arrest me! I've worked for Mr. Snead only a few days—"

"You'll have to think up a better story than that!" she was told bluntly. "Your name has been mixed up in underhanded deals before, but this is the first time we've been able to get any evidence against you."

While the prisoners were being rounded up, Karl Abbott rushed over to the girls and quickly freed their hands.

"Are you all right?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes," Nancy told him, "but if you hadn't arrived just when you did, it might have been a different story!"

She was on the verge of asking what had brought him to the cave at the psychological moment when she saw that two federal agents were placing handcuffs on the wrists of Maurice Hale's wife. Breaking away from her friends, Nancy darted to the other side of the room.

"Oh, don't arrest Mrs. Hale," she pleaded. "She isn't like the rest. She tried to save us, but they wouldn't listen to her."

"Sorry," Horton returned, "but we'll have to take her along. If you want to intercede for her later, we may be able to have her sentence lightened."

After the prisoners had been herded out of the cave to waiting government automobiles and the printing plates used in the making of the counterfeit bills had been collected, Nancy felt

explanations were in order from Karl.

"How did you know we had come here?" Nancy asked him.

"From Mrs. Byrd. She was greatly worried. When I came to see Father tonight she told me that after you'd gone she found evidence of your costume making. She confided in me you might have done just what you did. She asked me to try and stop you."

"Yes. Go on," Nancy urged.

"Well, I've been suspicious of this hillside ceremony stuff, and after talking further with Mrs. Byrd, I decided to get in touch with the Secret Service men she said you had told her about. They couldn't come, but the chief agent in this area sent some of his other men."

"How marvelous of you to have put two and two together!" Bess exclaimed.

"By the time we all got here," Karl went on, "no one was around. I sneaked inside just as all of you were coming out. Mr. Horton thought you girls would not be harmed if you walked outside before the gang was captured."

"Thanks for that," said George. "I've had enough!"

Just then Secret Service Agent Horton came over to Nancy's group and extended his hand to her. "Miss Drew," he said earnestly, "I want to thank you for your work which has resulted in the solution of one of the most baffling cases of counterfeiting the United States Government has ever had. How did you do it?"

Nancy blushed at the praise. "It was sort of a chain reaction, I guess," the young sleuth replied, and told of the various circumstances that had led to tonight's adventure.

When she finished, the agent shook his head in amazement. "You cracked a code this gang had thought was unbreakable. My congratulations."

It was late when the four girls, escorted by Karl Abbott, left the cave. As they neared the farmhouse, Joanne observed that the lights were on. "I hope Gram hasn't been too worried."

Before the girls reached the porch, Mrs. Byrd came hurrying toward them. She clung tightly to Joanne for an instant.

"I'm so glad you're back," she murmured in relief. "And you girls are all right. I was terribly afraid those members of the Black Snake Colony—"

She was interrupted by Mrs. Salisbury's voice from the dark porch. "You had us so worried we couldn't go to bed. The idea of girls running around the country at this hour! That nature cult is all foolishness, anyway!"

"Absolutely!" Mr. Abbott agreed. "The less you meddle with their affairs, the wiser you'll be!"

"You're wrong this time, Father," Karl Jr. announced. "If the girls hadn't meddled, those counterfeiters would have operated indefinitely."

"Counterfeiters!" the two boarders and Mrs. Byrd exclaimed together.

They were tense as Karl Jr. related everything that had happened. In fact, it was not until the next day that Mrs. Salisbury recovered from the shock sufficiently to boast:

"Well, I always said those girls were up and coming!"

Mr. Abbott was very proud of the part his son had played in the case, and said so several times.

Mrs. Byrd had nothing except praise for Nancy and her friends. "And who would think," she said incredulously, "that Bess's innocent purchase of a bottle of perfume would lead you girls to a mystery right here at Red Gate Farm!"

However, the removal of the Black Snake Colony from her property left her a serious financial problem. "I'm glad they're gone," she said, "but I'll miss the money. I can't hope to rent the land again. It isn't fertile enough for farming. All this talk about counterfeiters is apt to give Red Gate a bad name, too. I'll probably lose those other boarders who were coming!"

"Publicity is a queer thing," Nancy said thoughtfully. "Sometimes one can work it to one's advantage. That's what we'll do now."

"How?" Joanne asked.

"We'll advertise that counterfeiters' cavern to sightseers and make enough money to lift a dozen mortgages!"

The others were enthusiastic. During the next week the girls, with Karl Jr.'s assistance, placed in the cave for public display an imitation setup of the counterfeiting operation. There were several old printing presses, and some dummy figures arranged before them as if "at work." Scattered about the cave floor were stacks of homemade "money"—to represent counterfeit bills.

The following week Mr. Drew came to Red Gate Farm. A few miles away he halted his automobile at the side of the road, and with an amused smile studied a large billboard which read:

Follow the arrow to Red Gate Farm! See the mysterious cavern used by counterfeiters! Admission fifty cents.

As Carson Drew continued slowly in his car, he presently came to another sign, bolder than the first:

Regain health at Red Gate Farm. Boarders by Day or Week.

The traffic was unusually heavy, and the lawyer soon realized that all of the cars were headed for the farm. The place was crowded. He parked as near the house as he could and walked up the path. The grounds were well kept and equipped with swings and huge umbrellas. A number of persons, evidently boarders, were enjoying the garden.

Before Carson Drew had reached the front door, it was flung open, and Nancy rushed to meet him. "Dad!" she cried joyfully. "Isn't this wonderful?"

"You've done a magnificent job, Nancy."

After a hearty dinner Nancy and her friends took Mr. Drew to the hillside cave. Reuben Ames, looking most unlike himself in a new suit which was a trifle too tight, was in his glory as he conducted groups of visitors through the cavern.

"I've collected thirty dollars already today," he hailed Nancy as she came up with her friends. "This beats plowin' corn."

Bess grinned. "Didn't I always say that adventure follows Nancy Drew around?"

And Bess was right, for another exciting adventure awaited her courageous friend, who very soon was to become involved in *The Clue in the Diary*.

Mr. Drew laughed. "Nancy," he said, "as I think of your adventure at Red Gate Farm I can't decide whether you're better as a detective or as a promoter!"

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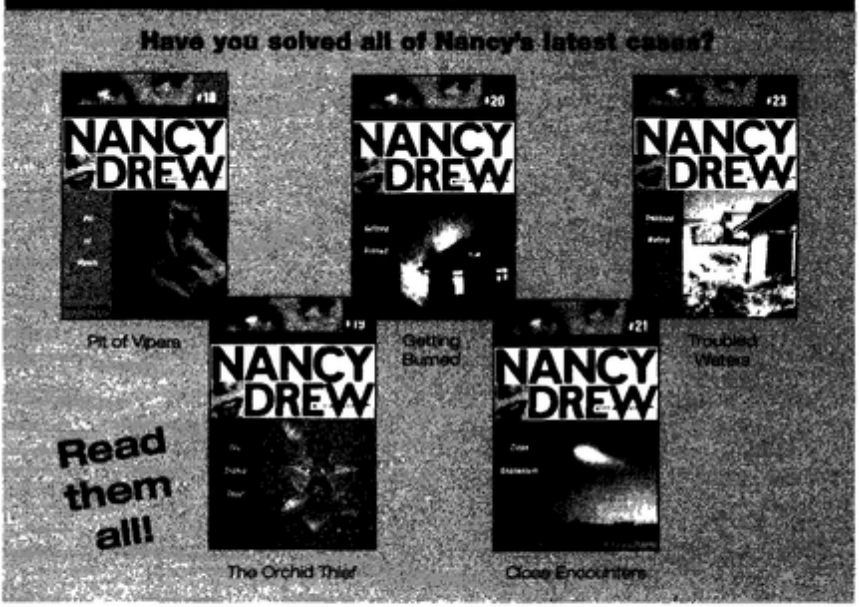

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NANCY DREW MYSTERY STORIES®

The Clue in the Diary

BY CAROLYN KEENE

GROSSET & DUNLAP
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THE CLUE IN THE DIARY

NANCY and her friends, George and Bess, are returning from a country carnival when they witness the explosion and burning of a beautiful country mansion. Fearing its occupants may be trapped in the blazing building, they rush to the rescue—and unexpectedly find themselves confronted with a mystery that seems to be insoluble.

The first clue is an anonymous diary, its entries in a handwriting difficult to decipher. Even more puzzling are the technical drawings and chemical formulas contained in its pages.

Who dropped the diary near the burning house? Was it the gaunt stranger Nancy glimpsed running away from the flaming structure? What was he doing there? And does he know the whereabouts of Felix Raybolt, an unscrupulous dealer in patents, who has not been seen since his home burned? Or did Raybolt die in the fire?

Fire investigators believe that the destructive explosion and fire may not have been an accident—but an act of revenge. Evidence mounts against Joe Swenson, an inventor who was swindled by “Foxy Felix.” Prompted by her affection for Mr. Swenson’s five-year-old daughter Honey, the young detective makes a desperate effort to exonerate the inventor of the suspicion of arson. How she accomplishes this makes another exciting Nancy Drew mystery.

“It’s evidence against him!” Nancy said to herself. “He can’t destroy it!”

NANCY DREW MYSTERY STORIES®

The Clue in the Diary

BY CAROLYN KEENE

GROSSET & DUNLAP
Publishers • New York
A member of The Putnam & Grosset Group

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CHAPTER I

A Suspicious Stranger

"A PENNY for your thoughts, Nancy Drew," said George Fayne. "You've been staring into space for nearly two minutes!"

"And missing all this good food!" added blond Bess Marvin. The slightly plump, pretty girl reached for a third sandwich.

"George," said Nancy to Bess's slim, short-haired cousin, who enjoyed her boy's name, "I'm worried about that darling Swenson child and her mother. I wish we could do something to help them."

"You mean," said Bess, "find Mr. Swenson, or the money his wife told us he had promised to send?"

"Yes," Nancy answered. "It's very mysterious, since apparently he has been away for some time. I wonder if his letters—containing money orders —were stolen."

"That's a federal offense," George said grimly.

The three girls, seated beneath a spreading roadside maple tree, were enjoying a picnic supper. The peaceful spot was halfway between their home town of River Heights and Sandy Creek, where they had attended a popular annual carnival.

Bess chuckled. "If there's a thief around, Nancy will capture him!" She reached for a deviled egg. "Count me in to help with the sleuthing —if it's not too dangerous."

"I wouldn't count on its *not* being dangerous," said George. "You know Nancy."

The young sleuth smiled at this remark, but in a moment became serious again. All of Nancy's friends agreed that she possessed an

intangible appealing quality which people never forgot.

Nancy was pretty in a distinctive way. Her eyes were blue, her hair titian blond. She expressed her opinions firmly, but did not force them on others. Nancy's abilities of leadership were welcome and depended upon in any group.

With Bess and George, Nancy had made the drive to Sandy Creek in her convertible. From the breath-taking "Whip" to the airplane swings, they had left nothing untried, and true to her reputation, Nancy had unearthed an adventure.

Her attention had been drawn to a little girl and her mother among the carnival crowd. They had been looking on wistfully, but had taken no part in the fun. Nancy and her friends had sensed that the mother could not afford admission tickets. On impulse, the girls had invited them to go along on several rides.

The three had fallen in love with five-year-old Honey. She was a bright and appealing child in spite of the fact that she looked undernourished. Her dress, though neat, was faded.

"Honey was so adorable," Nancy remarked, half to herself.

"Yes, she certainly was," Bess agreed.

"We must see the Swensons again," Nancy said thoughtfully. "I can't bear to think of that little girl's going without the things she needs. We'll visit the Joe Swenson family someday soon at their home. You wrote down the address, didn't you, Bess?"

"Yes."

"It won't be easy to do things for Mrs. Swenson," George predicted. "That woman is proud. You can see that."

"I know," Nancy admitted. "She didn't like our paying for everything at the carnival, but for Honey's sake she allowed it."

Bess, gazing toward the west, observed that the sun was sinking below the horizon. "We'd better be on our way," she declared.

The girls arose and put the food wrappings into the car. They had pulled into a side road. Now Nancy carefully steered the convertible over the rough road to the main highway, then headed for River Heights.

After the first few miles, Bess slumped down and wearily leaned her head back against the seat, while gazing out the window. "Nice homes along this road," she observed presently.

"Mostly country estates," George added.

“Look at that large white house on the hill.” Nancy pointed toward one with spacious grounds and a woods behind it. “Isn’t it a dream? The lawns are so well kept. Just my idea of a country place.”

“Wonder who owns it?” George asked.

Nancy had no chance to reply. Suddenly there was a tremendous explosion, and in an instant the lovely white house on the hillside burst into flames! Tongues of fire leaped from the windows and doors.

“There may be people trapped inside!” Nancy cried out. “We must help them!”

She drove frantically toward the burning house, pressing the automobile horn incessantly, hoping to attract the attention of neighboring residents. As the girls passed other vehicles, Bess and George shouted and pointed toward the house on the hill.

“We’ll need all the help we can get,” Nancy said grimly, “if anyone is to be rescued.”

The convertible swung into the driveway and headed up the hill toward the burning building. At a glance it was apparent to the girls that the house could not be saved. Nancy stopped the car and the three jumped out.

"There may be people trapped inside!" Nancy cried out

"If there are people trapped inside," George exclaimed as they dashed toward the house, "how can we ever save them?"

The girls scanned the windows anxiously but could see no one. Already the smoke was thick and the heat warned them that they could not enter—at least, not from the front.

"I'll try the back," Nancy told the cousins. "The smoke may not be so dense there. You'd better take the car to the nearest house and phone the fire department."

As Bess and George hurried off, Nancy quickly rounded the house, only to be met by a heavy cloud of smoke being carried by the wind. It made her cough and choke, and for a moment her eyes burned so that she could barely see.

Nancy started forward again, then halted abruptly as she caught sight of a man about to crawl through the back hedge. He seemed to be running away from the burning building. Did this mean he might have set the house on fire?

"Stop!" Nancy cried.

The man turned his head and in the glare of the fire she caught a momentary but clear glimpse of his face. He was very blond, ruddy complex-ioned, and square jawed. Instantly he whirled, crawled through the thick hedge, and vanished.

"His actions were those of a guilty person," Nancy thought. Who was he? she wondered. Nancy saw him again when he stood up behind the hedge. The man was tall and gaunt, and poorly dressed.

"He doesn't look like a criminal," she thought. "But his identification might prove vitally important to the authorities."

Nancy had an instinctive talent for detective work. She was the only child of Carson Drew, a widely known lawyer. Mrs. Drew had passed away when Nancy was a very young child, and daughter and father had become close companions. They often helped each other on cases.

The first mystery Nancy had solved was *The Secret of the Old Clock,* involving her in a dangerous search for a missing will. Since then, she had successfully tackled other unusual cases. Nancy's most recent adventure, centering around a strange white-robed clan, cleared up *The Mystery at Red Gate Farm.*

As Nancy stood staring after the stranger who had disappeared into the woods, she heard fire engines clang up to the house. She dashed to the front and met George and Bess, breathless from running. Neighbors were arriving from all directions, some on foot, others in automobiles. The sight of the burning building had attracted passing motorists, and the driveway was quickly jammed with cars.

The firemen realized at once that nothing could be saved. By

playing heavy streams of water on the house, the firemen barely succeeded in keeping the blaze from spreading to the outbuildings.

"What a shame such a beautiful home had to burn!" Bess remarked as the girls watched the firemen work. "I—I hope the owners aren't in there."

A woman who was standing nearby turned to answer. "The Raybolts' house has been closed all summer, so I guess no one is inside."

"I hope not," Nancy murmured.

"So Mr. Raybolt doesn't know of his loss," Bess commented. "What a blow it will be!"

"Oh, I guess *Mrs.* Raybolt can stand it," the woman returned indifferently. "Her husband has plenty of money."

"You know them then?" Nancy questioned. The woman shook her head. "Only by reputation. I live near here, but the Raybolts were never neighborly."

"Have they a large family?" Nancy asked.

"No, there are only the two of them, and they're a pair! Mrs. Raybolt thinks she's a bit too good for anyone around here." Nancy and her friends gathered that the owners of the ruined house were far from well liked.

In spite of the desperate efforts of the firemen, it was impossible to keep the blaze under control. Nancy noted with alarm that the wind was steadily rising and veering to the north. At any moment the outbuildings might ignite.

"Oh!" Bess cried. "Look! The roof of the house is falling in!"

A wave of heat drove the girls back a few steps and unexpectedly a thick cloud of smoke blew toward them. Nancy choked and gasped. When the smoke did not clear away she ran to escape it.

Bess and George had scattered in opposite directions, and when Nancy looked about for them, they were not in sight. Before she could call their names, the wind brought another cloud of dense smoke swirling down upon her.

Blindly Nancy stumbled toward the driveway where it curved around the rear of the house. She ran straight into a small wooden structure, and the impact nearly knocked her over. As the smoke drifted away, she could not help laughing. "Only a doghouse!" she thought. "Lucky there was no mean dog in it to attack me!"

As Nancy started back to the driveway she caught sight of a small leather-covered book lying a few feet from the doghouse. Eagerly Nancy snatched it up.

She decided that the book must have been dropped that day. Otherwise, the cover would have been ruined by a heavy rain the previous night. Nancy was struck with a sudden idea. When running across the back lawn of the burning house, the mysterious tall stranger must have passed this very spot. Could he have dropped the book?

“Perhaps I’ve stumbled on a clue!” Nancy thought excitedly.

CHAPTER II

An Excitable Driver

NANCY thrust the little book into the pocket of her sports dress. She resisted the temptation to examine it on the spot, for wind-whipped sparks from the fire were flying in every direction.

She glanced about quickly but could not locate her friends. Bess and George were lost in the crowd.

A flying ember narrowly missed Nancy. “I’d better be on the move!” she warned herself, observing that the wind had shifted, and was blowing toward the driveway.

Nancy saw with alarm that a patch of dry grass had flared up very close to the parked automobiles. Several men leaped forward, and began stamping on the flames, but the burning embers were dropping everywhere.

Nancy hurried toward her convertible. “I’d better move it!” she thought.

Suddenly Nancy stopped and stared in astonishment. A strange young man was climbing into her car. The next instant he started the motor!

“Bess and George must have left the key in the ignition lock!” Nancy said to herself, rushing forward, “Is he trying to steal my car?”

Nancy reached the convertible just as the self-appointed driver started to back it down the driveway, skillfully avoiding the other vehicles which were parked at various angles nearby.

“Your car?” he inquired with a disarming smile as Nancy ran alongside the convertible. “I thought I’d move it out of the danger zone.”

"Thank you," Nancy murmured a trifle uncertainly. "I think it will be safe right here unless the wind changes again."

The young man pulled as close to the edge of the drive as possible. He was about nineteen, Nancy decided, surveying him critically. His hair was dark and slightly curly, his eyes whimsical and friendly. He wore a college fraternity pin.

Nancy was still wary, nevertheless. The stranger must have read her thoughts, for he slid from behind the wheel and with a cheerful nod of farewell disappeared into the crowd.

"I don't know what to make of him," Nancy thought in bewilderment. "He looks like a nice person—and yet, appearances can be deceiving. Oh, dear, where *are* Bess and George?"

At that very moment she caught sight of the cousins hurrying toward her. "We thought we'd lost you for good," George declared as the girls climbed into the car. "Look at my dress, will you! I stumbled over a stone and landed flat!"

"And I'm nearly suffocated from smoke!" Bess said weakly.

"I think it's time we start for home," Nancy declared. "If this wind keeps up, the fire will last for hours. We've done all we can to help."

Bess and George readily agreed to leave, and it seemed that dozens of other spectators felt the same way. The wind had increased in velocity, posing a fresh threat to all the cars in the vicinity of the burning house. Many vehicles crowded into the narrow driveway leading to the main road, and soon a traffic jam resulted.

Horns blasted noisily. Fenders scraped and angry words were hurled back and forth.

"Why *don't* they stop honking?" George exclaimed impatiently. "It doesn't help a bit. We'll be here all night!"

Inch by inch Nancy's car progressed toward the main road, with the congested traffic beginning to unsnarl itself. Then suddenly a new shower of sparks descended upon the automobiles nearest the house. The drivers of these cars, anxious to get away from the flying embers, tried to force their way into the line of traffic ahead by crowding in out of turn.

"Look out!" George cried suddenly. "That man is going to hit us!"

Nancy was trapped. The driver apparently had lost control of his sedan. *Crash!* It plowed into the rear of Nancy's convertible with an impact that gave the three girls a severe jolt.

They sat stunned for a moment, but fortunately none of them was

injured. Nancy leaped out, and saw at a glance that her car had been badly damaged. One fender was crumpled, the rear lights were smashed, and the bumper dragged on the ground.

Her first inclination was to tell the driver what she thought of the incompetent way he had handled his car. But the man was instantly apologetic, and obviously so shaken that Nancy relented. She wrote down his name, address, and license number.

"I'd also like the name of your insurance company, Mr. Weston," Nancy told him.

The thin, wiry man became more flustered than ever. "I—I'm terribly sorry. I'm in such a state of confusion, I can't even remember the name. And I don't have the company's card with me."

It was finally decided that he would notify his agent about the accident, and Nancy would contact Mr. Weston after she had learned the total cost of repairs.

"The bill will be taken care of, believe me," the man assured Nancy. "I'll collect my wits, once I'm home. No more driving for me in dangerous spots. Doctor says I shouldn't drive, anyway. Too nervous."

With a final apology, the excitable Mr. Weston retreated to his sedan, and after much difficulty, maneuvered his way past Nancy's disabled car.

"He sure *shouldn't* drive!" George exclaimed. "That man's a menace!"

Bess looked at Nancy. "You don't think he was putting on an act about the insurance, do you?" she said. "You'll have a huge repair bill!"

"I know," Nancy returned. "Don't worry. You may be sure Mr. Weston will pay it—one way or another. Right now, we must get out of this mess!"

"How'll we get home with the bumper dragging?" George questioned.

"We'll have to find a garage," Nancy said as the girls seated themselves once more in the convertible.

Nancy started again and slowly moved forward. George groaned. "The rear of this car sounds as if it were about to fall out!"

Just then Nancy was forced to a halt by the bumper-to-bumper traffic. The girls might have been held up indefinitely on the hillside, but fortunately a young man stepped in to act as a traffic policeman. In a few minutes he had the line of cars moving steadily. By the time

the girls reached the exit of the Raybolt grounds, the tangle was fairly well straightened out.

To Nancy's surprise, she saw that the young man was the same one who had moved her convertible a short time before.

"I did misjudge him," she chided herself. "He *was* only trying to help and didn't have the slightest intention of stealing my car. How silly of me!"

On the main road at last, Nancy pulled off to the side to learn the full extent of the damage to her car. While she was surveying the rear axle doubtfully, the young man came over and offered his services.

"I'm Ned Nickerson," he declared with a warm smile. "Anything I can do?"

"Yes," Nancy said. "Please tell us how far it is to the nearest service garage. Another car banged into mine—as you can see."

"There's a garage at Mapleton—about two miles away."

"I wonder if my car will hold together even that short distance."

"It should, if your axle isn't badly damaged."

"But with the bumper dragging—"

"I'll fix that. I might as well pull it off entirely."

With a strong, deft twist, Ned Nickerson tore the bumper loose and placed it in the trunk compartment.

"Look here!" he proposed suddenly. "I'm going to Mapleton—my home's there. I'll keep close behind your car and push it if necessary."

"Thanks a lot," Nancy said gratefully, "but I don't like to trouble you."

"No trouble at all. Glad to do it."

She smiled and introduced herself and the other girls.

When the four reached the Mapleton garage, a mechanic inspected the convertible and said, "I'm afraid I can't have this car ready for at least an hour, miss. Even at that I can't touch the fender or taillights. You'll have to leave the car until tomorrow or else get the work done at your home garage. The best I can do now is fix you up so you can make it home."

"An hour, you say?" Nancy asked. "I suppose we'll have to wait, but we're in a hurry to get to River Heights."

"How about my treating to ice-cream sodas while we wait," Ned suggested. "There's a drug store across the street."

The girls accepted and phoned their homes about the delay. The hour passed quickly. After a gay get-acquainted session, Ned accompanied Nancy, Bess, and George back to the garage.

"I'll have the car ready in ten minutes," the mechanic promised.

The young people went outside and chatted about the recent events. But soon their attention was attracted by a group of men standing under a nearby street lamp discussing the Raybolt fire.

"'Pears mighty strange to me that a fire would start when the place ain't been occupied all summer," one elderly man commented.

"Old Raybolt deserved to be burnt out," another added. "The skinflint! He'd steal a crust of bread from a starvin' child!"

"Wouldn't surprise me if he burned the place down himself—to get the insurance," a third voice chimed in. "I wouldn't put it past Foxy Felix!"

Nancy and her friends heard no more, for at that moment the mechanic announced that her car was ready. "It's the best I could do on such short notice," he told her. "Better have your garage man give it a general overhauling when you get home."

While Ned backed the convertible out of the shop, Nancy paid the mechanic and asked him for a receipted bill. She explained that she wished to collect from the motorist who had crashed into her.

"I take it Mr. Raybolt isn't very well liked around here," Nancy remarked to Ned as she relieved him at the wheel.

"No, he isn't," Ned declared emphatically. "He's about as popular as a tiger who's escaped from a circus!"

"Apparently they call him Foxy Felix."

"Yes, and from all one hears about him the name is deserved." An odd expression flashed across Ned's face and he looked intently through the window at Nancy. "I also wonder what could have started that fire! You know, I have a sneaking suspicion it didn't start by accident."

"So have I," Nancy returned with a meaningful grin.

Before Ned could question her, she quickly but graciously thanked him for his help, then drove away.

"You girls haven't seen the last of me," the young man called gaily after them. "I know the road to River Heights. Don't be surprised if I follow it one of these days!"

CHAPTER III

The Diary

"DID you hear what Ned Nickerson said?" Bess Marvin teasingly asked Nancy, who pretended to be intent upon her driving. "You've made a hit, all right!"

"Hit!" Nancy retorted. "The only thing that was hit is the back of my car. Won't Dad be shocked when he sees the wreck I'm bringing home!"

"She's trying to change the subject!" George chortled. "Look at her blush. You can tell she likes him."

"Why shouldn't I?" Nancy defended herself stanchly. "Ned Nickerson certainly helped us out of a tight spot."

"He's handsome, too." Bess giggled. "And what a soulful expression in those big blue eyes of his when he looks at our Nancy!"

"Were they blue? I thought they were—" Nancy broke off as she realized that Bess had deliberately trapped her. "All right, you win!" She laughed. "But just to get even I've half a mind not to tell you what I discovered while we were at the fire."

"Oh, come on!" George pleaded.

"All right. I'll forgive you this time."

Nancy was eager to relate what she had observed at the Raybolt grounds, for she wondered if her chums would interpret the incident the same way. She told them of the suspicious, gaunt-looking stranger who had run away from the burning house.

"That man must have set it on fire!" Bess declared. "Otherwise, why would he be afraid to answer when you called?"

"He might have been a tramp who went into the house for shelter," George suggested thoughtfully, "and started the fire accidentally—perhaps from a lighted cigarette."

"I thought of that," Nancy admitted, "but it seems to me if the fire had begun that way it would have burned more slowly. Remember the sound of an explosion and how the house appeared to blaze up all at once?"

"That's true," George said, then added, "Guess we'll have to wait for the investigators' reports."

There was not much traffic that evening, and the girls reached River Heights in good time.

"There's Mother out on the porch!" Bess cried as they drew up before the Marvin residence. "She's been watching for us."

Next, Nancy dropped George at her home and then drove to the Drew house. As she pulled into the driveway, her father and Hannah Gruen, the housekeeper, came rushing out. Mr. Drew was tall and distinguished looking. The housekeeper, pleasantly plump, had a motherly expression.

"Are you all right?" they asked Nancy in unison.

"Yes, indeed, but I'm afraid my car will never look the same again."

"I don't care about the car," Mr. Drew said to his daughter, "as long as you're not hurt." Then he relaxed and asked, "The question now is how big a lawsuit will I have on my hands?"

"Suit? Oh, I see. You think I backed into another car. Don't worry. Another car ran into *mine.* I have the driver's name and license number. I'm to get in touch with him and let him know my repair cost."

As they entered the house, Mrs. Gruen went to the kitchen, while Nancy and her father turned into the living room.

"Tell me more about the fire," Mr. Drew urged. "Whose house is it?"

"The owner is Felix Raybolt."

"Felix Raybolt! Foxy Felix!" Mr. Drew exclaimed.

"Do you know him?" Nancy asked, surprised.

"Only by reputation—which isn't enviable. As a matter of fact, just today I accepted a case for a client, Arnold Simpson, who wants to sue Mr. Raybolt. He tells me there are many other people who would like to do so."

"What is Mr. Raybolt like, Dad?"

"Very shrewd, and very unfriendly. I understand he's wealthy."

"How did he make his money?"

"He deals in patents, and I've heard he made fortunes on some of them."

"You mean, Mr. Raybolt invents things?" Nancy questioned.

"No, he buys patents from inventors and cashes in on their ideas."

"Is that legitimate?"

"Yes, he has a right to buy a patent and make a profit from it. The unfair part is that Raybolt takes advantage of the inventor by verbally promising to pay him a royalty after he has marketed the device.

"In fact, that is the complaint of my client. He told me that Raybolt purchased a patent from him covering a certain part for an automatic elevator at a ridiculously low figure, then sold the patent to a manufacturing concern for a much higher sum. When Mr. Simpson reminded Raybolt of his promise, Foxy Felix turned him down — practically laughed in his face."

"No wonder people dislike Mr. Raybolt," Nancy remarked. "I suppose there are certain persons who might have set fire to his house out of pure revenge."

"Undoubtedly."

After a late, light supper, Nancy admitted being tired. She said good night to her father and Hannah and went upstairs.

As she slipped off her dress, the red leather booklet which she had found on the Raybolt estate dropped to the floor. Nancy snatched it up with an exclamation of eagerness.

"This may furnish the clue I need!" she thought. "At any rate, I have an idea it will prove interesting. I'll read it this very night!"

Nancy forgot that she was tired and sleepy. Undressing hastily, she adjusted the reading lamp and took the book to bed with her.

"This is a diary," she decided, noting that each entry was preceded by a date. "Perhaps it contains the owner's name and address."

Settling herself comfortably against the pillow, Nancy opened the loose-leaf booklet. She stared in surprise at the first entry. The page was filled with baffling words, written in a foreign language.

She studied the text. Finally two familiar words struck her eye. "*Adjö*-good-by. And *god vän*—good friend. Swedish!" Nancy murmured, recalling that a schoolmate of hers, a girl from Sweden, had often spoken these words in her native tongue.

“Oh, dear, I can’t read the rest of it!” The young detective groaned.

She rapidly leafed through the pages. All the entries were in Swedish except the last few, which were written in cramped English.

Nancy held the diary closer to the reading lamp and tried to make out the words. But it was a discouraging task, since the letters had been run together in an indistinguishable fashion. She did manage to decipher a few scattered phrases, but try as she would, Nancy could not figure out a single entire sentence.

“How exasperating!” she thought impatiently. “This diary may contain a valuable clue, but I can’t read it!”

The notations in Swedish were in larger handwriting than those in English. Nancy felt sure the diary belonged to a man, for though the writing was small and cramped, the characters were bold. She reflected, too, that if the little journal *had* been dropped by the stranger whom she had seen running away from the fire, it was all the more important for her to learn his name and what he had written in the diary.

“I’ll have to find someone who can read Swedish,” she said to herself. “If only Karen were here!” But Nancy’s former schoolmate had returned to her native country with her family.

With that thought Nancy lowered her pillow, put out the light, and the next instant was asleep. It seemed only minutes later when she was awakened by the ringing of the telephone in the hall. The sun was shining through the windows and from the angle of the rays Nancy guessed that it must be after nine o’clock. Hannah, knowing that she was exhausted, had let her oversleep.

With a guilty start, Nancy jumped out of bed. Before she could open the door, Mrs. Gruen came in. “Good morning, Nancy. A young man wishes to speak to you on the phone.”

“I’ll be there in a jiffy. Don’t let him escape!”

Thrusting her feet into dainty black-and-gold slippers and snatching up her dressing robe, Nancy hurried to the hall telephone.

“Hope I didn’t get you out of bed,” a low, pleasant voice came over the wire. “This is Ned —Ned Nickerson,”

“Oh!” Nancy stammered, taken completely by surprise.

“You probably think I’m rushing things a bit,” Ned went on, “but I picked up a ring at the Raybolts’ this morning, and thought it might be yours.”

“I didn’t wear one yesterday,” Nancy returned, finding her voice at

last. “George or Bess might have lost one, though.”

“The ring couldn’t be theirs. It has a ‘D’ on it.”

“Did you find the ring in the ashes?” Nancy questioned with rising interest.

“No. The firemen and police won’t let anyone go near the ruins. I found the signet ring near the hedge back of the house.”

There was a brief moment of silence as Nancy mulled this over. Then she asked quickly, “Does that ring bear a Swedish inscription? If it does, I may have a clue to the owner.”

She was thinking of the stranger she suspected of being the owner of the mysterious diary—the man who had vanished behind the Raybolt hedge.

“There is an inscription in a foreign language, but I can’t read it,” Ned told her. “Say! Would you like to see the ring?”

“Love to,” Nancy confessed. “It may furnish a clue. But shouldn’t the ring be turned over to the police?”

Ned did not agree. “I believe, at least for the time being, it’s a case of ‘Finders Keepers.’ The ring was a good distance away from the fire area.”

“All right, then. I *am* eager to see it.”

“If you’ll let me, I’ll drop around tonight at eight and bring the ring along,” Ned offered.

“Good.”

After Ned had hung up, Nancy fairly danced back into the bedroom. She sent one slipper flying toward the bed, and the other into the far corner of the room. The young sleuth attempted to convince herself that her jubilant spirits were the result of Ned’s discovery. The ring might be a clue to the identity of the person who had set the Raybolt house on fire. Bess and George, she knew, would have interpreted her reaction very differently!

As soon as she had dressed, Nancy picked up the diary and placed it in her top bureau drawer for safekeeping.

“I wish I had time to go somewhere and have it translated right now,” she thought regretfully, “but it’s late and I must take my car to the garage.”

Nancy hurried downstairs to the kitchen. Mr. Drew had already eaten breakfast and left for his office. Hannah Gruen uncovered a hot plate on the stove.

“Mm, blueberry muffins,” Nancy said. After biting into one, she added, “Oh, this is extra delicious.” As she ate, Nancy told the housekeeper about wanting the diary translated.

“But kept confidential, I suppose,” Mrs. Gruen remarked. “It’s not often that I can help you on a mystery, Nancy, but this time I believe I can.”

CHAPTER IV

The Initialed Ring

"OH, HANNAH, that's wonderful!" Nancy exclaimed. "But don't tell me you can read Swedish."

"I wish I could. The person to translate the diary is our old Swedish bakery friend, Mr. Peterson. He has moved his shop to the other side of town."

"Oh, I remember Mr. Peterson," said Nancy with a chuckle. "When I was a little girl, and you and I went there, I used to wheedle tarts and cookies from him."

"And always get them," Mrs. Gruen replied, a twinkle in her eye. "You were his favorite customer. I'm sure that he'll be glad to translate the diary for you."

Nancy was delighted at the prospect of seeing kindly Oscar Peterson again.

"Hannah, that's a wonderful idea! I'll go to the bakery first chance I have. Right now, I must have my car fixed."

Nancy took the convertible to a garage downtown. The mechanic promised to have it ready sometime the following afternoon. Then Nancy walked slowly homeward. Suddenly Nancy heard her name called. Turning, she saw Bess and George hurrying to meet her.

"You must be daydreaming about Ned!" cried George as the cousins swung into step beside her. "We shouted three times."

"Sorry." Nancy laughed.

"'Fess up, now. Weren't you thinking about him?" Bess prodded.

An animated expression came over Nancy's face. Her eyes danced

mischievously as she told her bit of news.

"Ned phoned this morning before I was up."

"I told you!" Bess exclaimed. "You did make a hit! Wish I had your technique!"

"Silly! Ned phoned me on a matter of business. This morning he found a ring near the hedge at the Raybolt grounds and he thought it might belong to me. It has a 'D' on it."

"That was just an excuse," Bess declared. "Of course, you didn't lose one."

"My guess is that the ring was lost by the man I saw running away from the fire. I can hardly wait to see it."

"And Ned, too," George added wickedly.

Nancy laughed at her friends' persistence, and was a bit surprised to find that she was blushing. A little farther on, the cousins said good-by and went to their separate homes. Luncheon was ready when Nancy reached hers. She ate with Hannah Gruen, who was very much interested in the ring Ned had found.

"Do you think it may be a clue?" she asked Nancy.

"Yes, to the writer of the diary. I'm going to study the little book thoroughly this afternoon and see if I can find a name beginning with 'D.'"

"But aren't you going to Mr. Peterson's?" Hannah asked.

"Later. I promised to be here for a phone call from the crippled children's home. I'm to help with their kiddie show next month. In the meantime, I think I'll call Mrs. Swenson to see how she and Honey are and if she has heard from her husband yet."

"Sorry," said the operator, when Nancy had dialed. "That number has been temporarily disconnected." Nancy surmised Mrs. Swenson had been forced to give up her telephone because of lack of funds.

"As soon as my car is repaired, I must drive to their house and see Honey and her mother," Nancy decided. "I only hope Mrs. Swenson will let me help."

Nancy spent the next few hours poring over the diary. But nowhere did she come across a name beginning with "D." She made one important discovery, however. At the bottom of a page written in Swedish, Nancy found a tiny ink drawing. She deduced that it was a diagram for some part of an electronic machine.

"I'll make no progress until I have Mr. Peterson translate this book

for me," she thought.

Nancy was on the verge of going to the bakery by bus—but a glance at the clock told her the place would be closed. Besides, it was almost suppertime.

When Carson Drew arrived home, Nancy mentioned that her new friend, Ned Nickerson, was calling that evening.

"Oh, I see," her father drawled teasingly. "You want me to find it convenient to be away. Is that it?"

"Of course not. I particularly want you to meet Ned. He's bringing a ring that may interest you."

"Not a diamond, I hope!"

"Dad!" Nancy cried in exasperation. "You're as bad as Bess and George! Ned—Mr. Nickerson—is coming here on business."

"In that case," the lawyer said, his eyes twinkling, "I promise to be very proper and not embarrass you by asking the young man his intentions."

"You're absolutely hopeless!" Nancy laughed, gave her father a hug, and ran into the kitchen.

Even though Ned's visit was to be one of "business," Nancy coaxed Hannah to bake a cake to be served with ice cream later in the evening.

Mrs. Gruen smiled knowingly, and immediately set to work. After supper, Nancy washed the dishes, then hurried upstairs. There was barely time for her to change into a flowered dress and high-heeled shoes before the doorbell rang. She hurried down to admit Ned.

The first greeting over, they were both a trifle embarrassed and felt a little shy. Nancy was glad that her father appeared just then, for the introduction relieved the situation.

She could tell that Mr. Drew liked Ned by the hearty way in which he shook hands. Many persons were awed in the presence of the attorney, but Nancy was delighted to discover that Ned felt at ease with him.

Seated in the comfortable living room, the lawyer skillfully directed the conversation. He had been rather curious concerning Nancy's new acquaintance. Mr. Drew sensed that his daughter was more interested in him than in other young men whom she dated.

"Tell us about the ring, Ned," Nancy urged. "May we see it?"

Ned took the object from his suit-coat pocket and handed it to her.

Nancy observed that the signet ring probably belonged to a man, and was meant to be worn on the small finger. The polished black initial was set in relief on a gray background. Nancy studied the ring.

"It looks like an antique," she remarked, handing the ring to her father. "And the inscription inside is in Swedish, Dad. It's an expression my Swedish school friend always used: *Bar denna med tur*—wear this in luck!"

The discussion was interrupted at that moment by the ringing of the hall telephone. Carson Drew rose to answer it, and after a short conversation, came back and said regretfully to their guest:

"I must go down to the office—new development in a case—so I must excuse myself. Sorry. Glad to have met you, Ned."

After Mr. Drew had departed, Ned told Nancy the details of his call that morning at the Raybolt grounds. He had gone there before breakfast in order to view the wreckage before the arrival of curious townsfolk. The house had been razed by the fire. Nothing had been salvaged.

"Did the investigators find a clue to the cause of the fire?" Nancy asked.

"So far it's only a theory," Ned replied. "But I learned that the police and fire officials surmise explosives in the cellar may have been set off by remote control."

"But how? And by whom?" Nancy queried in amazement.

"They have no idea. Even a passing car with a radio sending set could have done it accidentally."

"The house is pretty far from the road," Nancy countered. To herself she added, "Could that fleeing man who dropped the diary have used remote control—and not ever have been inside the house?"

Her thought was interrupted by Ned. "It's a queer case," he said. "Old Foxy Felix will get quite a jolt when he hears about the fire."

"Doesn't he know about it yet?" Nancy asked in surprise.

"Not according to latest reports. The Raybolts are still away. The neighbors tried to get in touch with them at the seashore hotel where they usually stay, but they're not registered."

"I wonder how much they will lose."

"Even with insurance, I'd say a goodly amount, including furniture and irreplaceable art objects."

"That will be a blow to the Raybolts, Ned."

"Yes, but everyone around Mapleton seems to think the old man had it coming to him. You hear all sorts of stories about the way he has connived to make money at other people's expense."

Nancy nodded, recalling what her father had told her. "I'm curious as to how Mr. Raybolt, especially, will take the loss."

"In the worst spirit, I imagine." Ned grinned. "If I find out, I'll let you know."

"I wish you would."

Nancy was tempted to tell Ned about the diary but decided not to until she knew more about it herself. After a very enjoyable evening, which ended with ice cream and Hannah's cake, Ned reluctantly stood up to depart.

"I don't know what to do with this ring," he said thoughtfully. "Why don't you keep it, Nancy?"

"I will if you want me to," she said eagerly. "Perhaps I'll find a clue to the owner through the inscription."

"That's what I figured. Let me know if you do." Ned grinned. "On second thought, perhaps I'd better drop over now and then to inquire."

Nancy's smile gave consent. Ned was still lingering on the porch steps when Carson Drew came up the walk. Nancy repeated what she had been told about the Raybolts' being unaware of their loss.

The lawyer raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Odd it's so hard to locate Raybolt. Perhaps, for the sake of my own client, I'll look into the matter."

"Why don't you, Dad? Mr. Raybolt may be able to furnish a clue to what caused the fire."

"You're right, Nancy," the lawyer said. "Raybolt may have had enemies who deliberately set fire to the house. If so, this might affect my case." The lawyer did not reveal why.

A few minutes later Ned said good night, jumped into his car, and drove away.

"How do you like him?" Nancy asked Mr. Drew hopefully as they walked into the house together.

"Nice boy," the lawyer commented. "I suppose I'll be seeing a lot of him from now on."

"Could be." Nancy laughed, kissed her father, and ran off to her room.

She did not retire immediately. Instead, she examined the signet ring more carefully. Finally she placed it in the bureau drawer with the diary.

“I have two clues now instead of one,” Nancy assured herself jubilantly. “But the question is, are they connected?”

As she undressed, Nancy determined to call on the Swedish baker early the next morning.

“I *must* find out what the diary says!”

CHAPTER V

A Dangerous Detour

As SOON as the morning's chores were finished, Nancy and Hannah Gruen set out on a bus for Oscar Peterson's bakery. Entering the clean little shop, fragrant with the odor of freshly baked bread, they were disappointed not to see the Swedish owner at the counter.

"Is Mr. Peterson in?" Nancy asked the girl in charge.

The young woman shook her head. "He's in bed upstairs, ill."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Nancy. "Give him our best wishes, and tell him we hope he'll be well soon."

"Oh, Mr. Peterson expects he'll feel good enough to come down to the shop this afternoon," the girl told her.

"Fine," Nancy replied. "I'll be back."

After Mrs. Gruen had bought some rolls, she and Nancy left the shop with the diary still in Nancy's big purse.

Although disappointed, Nancy said, "Oh, well, I'll see Mr. Peterson later in the day."

Back home, Nancy again looked through the diary, hopeful of learning something from it. As she was puzzling over the blurred, cramped English, a word suddenly caught her eye.

"It's part of an address!" Nancy cried, highly elated. "I'm certain of it!"

Getting her father's magnifying glass from the desk, Nancy held it above the blurred writing, then read the words:

Riverwood Cottage, Sandy Creek.

Nancy stared at the address. “The Swensons!” she thought excitedly.

The young detective telephoned George and Bess and asked them to come over. When the cousins arrived, she rushed them into the living room and showed them the address.

“Riverwood Cottage, Sandy Creek!” Bess exclaimed. “That’s where the Swensons live!”

“Boy, this certainly complicates matters,” George declared.

Nancy nodded, knowing she had stumbled on a valuable, yet disturbing clue. Could it be that Honey’s father was the man who had set fire to the Raybolt home? If so, what motive could he have had? Intuition warned Nancy that the clue might lead to heartbreak for Honey and her mother.

Nancy’s face was so troubled that Bess and George begged her to tell them what she was thinking. Nancy revealed her concern for the Swensons, and also told about the ring Ned had left with her. She then pointed to the Sandy Creek notation.

“So far, this is the only clear-cut clue the diary has yielded.” Nancy sighed. “But I hate to think what it may mean.”

Bess and George nodded soberly.

“I can’t imagine what Honey’s father could have to do with the fire,” Bess declared. “Yet everything fits in. The strange man you saw running away—the finding of the ring with the Swedish inscription near the hedge—”

“We don’t know if it belongs to him,” Nancy said quickly. “Remember, there’s a ‘D’ on it, and his initials are J and S.”

“Well, the *diary* must belong to Mr. Swenson, or someone who knows him,” George said. “Otherwise, his address wouldn’t be in it. I wonder what he’s like.”

“I wish we could meet him,” Nancy returned gravely. She mentioned her futile phone call to the Swenson home.

“What are you going to do about the diary?” Bess questioned curiously. “Turn it over to the police?”

“No, I’ll keep it until I can get a translation, and find out whether or not it means trouble for the Swensons.”

“Of course this is all only circumstantial evidence,” George reflected. “We’re not certain the man you saw is Swedish. Although, according to your description, he could be.”

“If he is Mr. Swenson, and he’s guilty of setting the fire, I suppose

he'll have to be brought to justice," Bess spoke up worriedly.

"I agree," Nancy said quietly. "But somehow I can't believe Honey's father would do a thing like that. She's such a sweet little thing, and her mother is a lovely person."

"I'd hate to get them involved, no matter what!" George declared feelingly. "I'm afraid they don't have enough to eat as it is, and if the father should go to prison—"

"Let's try to take an optimistic view," Nancy said. "Perhaps neither the diary nor the ring is Mr. Swenson's, or if they are, he may have a perfectly blameless reason for having been on the Raybolt grounds."

"I think you're right about working this puzzle out by yourself, Nancy," George commented. "You've had wonderful success on other mysteries. This may be your chance to help Honey and her mother."

"I wish my car were ready now!"

"When will it be?" Bess asked.

"Not until later today. I'll tell you what! Let's walk to the garage. It won't do any harm to spur the mechanic on a bit. When we come back we can stop at Dad's office and ask him if he has traced the Raybolts. He promised to try."

At the garage, the girls were dismayed to learn that repairs on the convertible were only half finished. The mechanic, however, assured Nancy that the car would be ready by midafternoon.

The girls stopped a few minutes at a department store where Bess bought some kitchen spoons for her mother, then they continued to Carson Drew's office. As usual, the lawyer was busy, but he found time to chat with his daughter and her friends.

"I had my secretary try to get in touch with Mr. Raybolt," he told Nancy, "but so far she hasn't been able to locate him—or his wife. They seem to have vanished!"

"Maybe Felix Raybolt has gone into hiding," Nancy suggested with a wry smile.

"Oh, I've no doubt he'll be heard from, once the news reaches him that his house has been ruined," said Mr. Drew. "I'll keep trying to locate him."

It was nearly twelve o'clock when the girls left the lawyer's office. Bess and George said they must go home to luncheon.

"Come have a bite with me," Nancy urged. "Then we can all go to see Mr. Peterson—if you don't mind taking the bus."

George and Bess eagerly accepted the invitation. They were as curious as Nancy concerning the contents of the diary. Hannah Gruen served a delicious meal, and it was nearly three o'clock before the girls finally boarded a bus to call on the Swedish baker.

"I'm dying to know what the diary says," George declared enthusiastically.

"I hope it won't make things look any worse for Honey's father," Bess murmured apprehensively.

As they alighted near the bakery, the girls were distressed to see an ambulance parked directly in front of the shop. A small group of spectators had gathered.

"There's been an accident!" Nancy exclaimed, quickening her step. "Oh, I hope nothing has happened to dear old Oscar Peterson!"

The girls reached the bakery at the same moment that the ambulance drove away, siren wailing.

"What happened?" Nancy asked a woman who was standing near the door of the shop. "Was someone hurt?"

"It was Mr. Peterson. He had a relapse, and the doctor ordered him to the hospital. Expect he'll be there a few days."

"How dreadful!" said Bess. "But, Nancy, what will you do about the diary now?"

Nancy, mainly concerned about the kindly baker, did not answer immediately. Finally she suggested they ask the baker's assistant if she knew of anyone who understood Swedish.

The woman gladly called several people, but none were at home. Nancy even phoned her father to see if he could recommend someone. But Mr. Drew was not at his office.

The girls were a little discouraged, but Nancy said, "We can still work on the mystery. My car should be finished by this time. If it is, we can drive over and visit Honey and her mother."

"That's a swell idea!" Bess and George chorused.

When they reached the garage, the girls were overjoyed to find the convertible ready. "Looks almost as good as new!" Nancy said, pleased. "I'll write a check for the amount."

To her chagrin, she had forgotten her checkbook.

"That's all right," the mechanic said. "I'm very busy, anyhow. I'll make out the bill later and drop it off at your home."

"Fine," Nancy said with a smile. Then she and the cousins phoned

their homes from an outside booth to report their destination. A few minutes later they set off on the highway for Sandy Creek.

Nancy slowed as she drove past the Raybolt estate. The girls glanced at the charred ruins of the once-beautiful mansion.

"I wish we had time to stop and talk to the men investigating the cause of the fire," Nancy said. "But we'd better get to the Swensons' first."

About ten miles farther on, Nancy came to a sawhorse across the road. "Detour!" George groaned. "It must've been put up yesterday."

"It isn't very long," Bess declared optimistically. "I can see the end of it."

The road had been closed to permit the construction of a new steel bridge. The bypass wound down into a valley, crossing the Muskoka River a quarter of a mile south.

"We'll lose time on this dirt road," Nancy remarked, turning into the detour. "Poor car! It'll be lucky to get through without jolting to pieces."

The road was ungraded and recent rains had left it rutty. In addition, it was narrow, with hardly any places wide enough for two cars to pass. Even though Nancy drove slowly, the ride was a bumpy one.

"Good way to break a spring—on a road like this!" she declared.

"Or a bone!" Bess added wryly.

A moment later the girls became aware of a loud, insistent honking behind them.

"Big truck right in back of you, Nancy," George observed.

"I know. Well, the driver will just have to wait. He can't pass me on this narrow stretch."

But the blowing of the truck's horn continued until Nancy became irritated, then indignant.

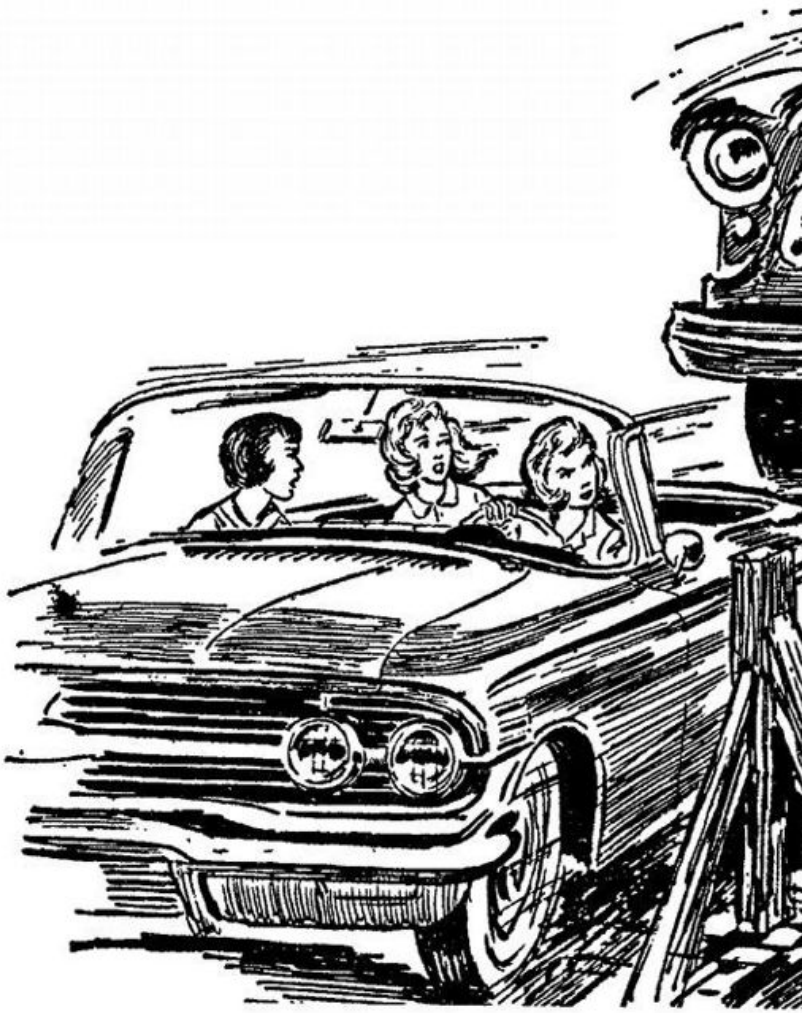
"What is the matter with that man?" Nancy increased her speed, hoping to leave the impatient driver behind. But he speeded up, keeping close to the convertible. Honk! *Honk!*

Honk!

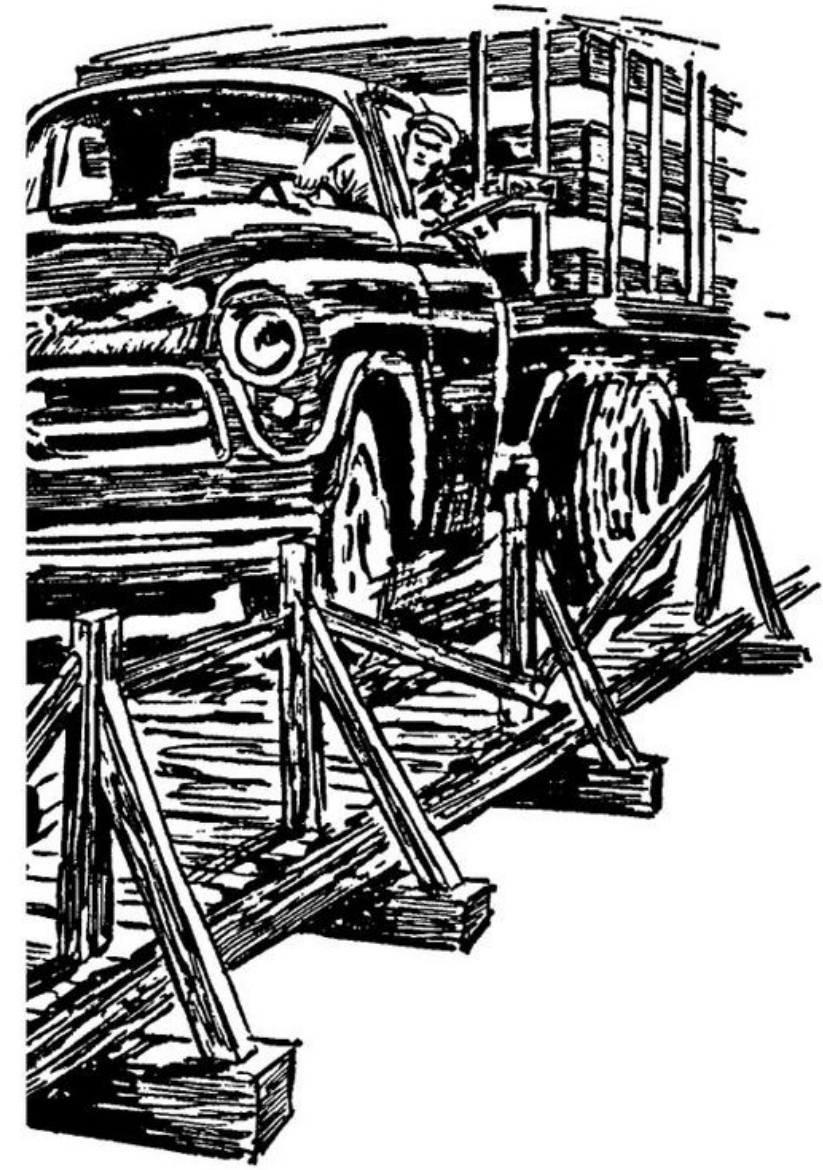
"If he doesn't s-stop that, I'll s-scream!" Bess complained. "And if we g-go any faster, I'll l-lose all my teeth."

The convertible was now bumping up and down unmercifully.

George turned around in her seat to glare at the horn-blowing driver. “Don’t give him an inch!” she told Nancy.



“Wouldn’t do him any good if I did. His truck’s too big to pass, and I’m certainly not going into a ditch to let him get by! He’ll have to wait until we reach the end of this detour!”



"What's his big hurry, anyhow?" George grumbled. "Probably just trying to make us nervous."

"Well, he's certainly succeeding so far as I'm concerned," Bess said.

Just then the girls came within sight of a wooden bridge—the end of the torturous road.

"Thank goodness!" Bess cried.

With the truck still bearing down on the convertible, Nancy drove

onto the bridge.

"It doesn't look very safe," Bess remarked uneasily. "No wonder they're building a new bridge."

"It doesn't sound safe, either!" George cried out as the loose planks creaked alarmingly under the weight of the car. "If that truck tries to pass us, we'll all crash through!"

But at that moment the girls heard the heavy truck clatter onto the wooden planks. "He's crazy!" George exclaimed. "This bridge will never hold us both!"

The words were barely out of her mouth when there came a cracking, splintering sound.

"Nancy!" Bess shrieked. "Look out!"

CHAPTER VI

Nancy's Strategy

AT BESS'S warning, Nancy glanced at the rear-view mirror and saw that the driver of the heavy truck did indeed intend to pass her! There was only one way for her to avert an accident: take her car full speed ahead.

"Here goes!" she cried out, and the convertible shot forward.

The three girls held their breaths, praying that the bridge would be strong enough to hold both vehicles. The old bridge creaked and groaned but held up despite a plank cracked by the truck.

Nancy had barely reached the far end when the truck sped past her at an alarming rate. It grazed her car and tore off part of the bridge railing. The driver rushed on pell-mell.

"That fellow's a madman!" George exclaimed angrily. "He should be arrested for reckless driving!"

"I wish I had taken his license number so we could report him to the police!" Bess added.

Nancy sighed. "At this point I'm just glad my car doesn't have to go into the repair shop again! I have a lot of work to do trying to solve the mystery of the Raybolt fire."

As the girls drove on toward Sandy Creek, they finally forgot their indignation. When they reached the town, Nancy asked a policeman for directions. Following these, she arrived at a section near the river where small houses were crowded together. Bess and George carefully scanned the weather-worn cottages, searching for one with the name "Riverwood."

Bess caught sight of it first. "I see Honey out front!" she said

eagerly. “Look! Isn’t she sweet?”

As Nancy halted the car before the old house, she saw that the child had fallen asleep under a tree. A large dog lay at her feet as though on guard. At the girls’ approach he jumped up and growled.

Nancy and her friends scarcely knew whether to advance or retreat, for the dog looked vicious and seemed determined to protect his tiny charge from the strangers. As they were hesitating, the child awoke. She recognized the girls at once, and scrambling up from the grass, ran toward them.

Despite her faded play suit and badly scuffed shoes, Honey was an attractive youngster. Her real name was Helen Ebba Swenson, but she had always been called Honey because of her sweet disposition. Her eyes were a bright blue, her fair skin was dotted with brown freckles, and her golden hair curled in a hundred ringlets.

“Hello, Honey,” Nancy greeted her. “Is your mother at home?”

The child shook her head. “Mommy’s gone to the post office to get a letter from Daddy. I wanted to go, but she said it was too far for me to walk.”

“Isn’t your father at home?” Nancy inquired softly.

“Oh, no,” Honey replied in her most grown-up manner. “He’s been gone a long time. Mommy’s worried. That’s why she went to the post office today.”

Nancy and her friends exchanged quick glances. Mrs. Swenson apparently still was awaiting word from her husband.

“Mommy’ll be coming home soon,” Honey went on, “‘cause it’s suppertime. I’m hungry, too.”

With a pang Nancy saw that the youngster looked thinner than ever.

“Mommy said if she could sell some of the eggs from our hens, she’d bring me something good to eat. I’m tired of eggs. We eat them all the time since Daddy left.”

“Haven’t you anything else?” George asked bluntly.

“We have a little bread. Mommy says we must make our money last until we hear from Daddy. She doesn’t know where he went and she cries a lot.”

Honey went on to tell the girls about her dog, Hans. “Daddy and I used to take him walking. Hans misses Daddy same as I do. Nancy, let’s all go in the house. I want to show you my toys Daddy made.”

Honey led the way inside. The living room was neat and smelled

fresh and clean. There was little furniture, one very small rug, and no draperies at the windows. Nancy's eye was attracted to a photograph that stood on a small table.

"Whose picture is that?" she asked Honey.

"My daddy!" Honey answered proudly.

Nancy's heart sank. It was a photograph of the stranger she had seen running away from the fire!

"Oh, dear!" she thought. "This is the worst situation I've ever been in!"

By this time Honey had brought out her toys from a cupboard. All were homemade, and several were mechanical, each one cleverly fashioned.

"My daddy's an in-ven-tor." The little girl had trouble pronouncing the word. "That's why he went away—to get back one of his in-ven-tions."

Nancy, Bess, and George looked at one another horrified. The same thoughts raced through their minds. Mr. Swenson an inventor! The Swedish diary Nancy had found at the scene of the fire! Mr. Raybolt's broken promises to inventors!

Bess, to hide tears that were gathering, walked into the kitchen. On impulse she opened the refrigerator and cupboards. They were practically empty. She came back and whispered to the others.

"Something must be done," Bess declared. "Why, Honey and her mother haven't enough to keep them from starving."

"It's up to us," Nancy announced firmly. "I have an idea! We'll all eat supper here!"

As George and Bess looked puzzled, Nancy hastily explained her plan. She would drive to Sandy Creek, pick up Honey's mother, and purchase enough food for supper.

"We'll have a regular feast," she promised. "How much money do you girls have with you?"

"Two dollars and ten cents," Bess said, opening her purse.

"I have only one dollar with me," George announced apologetically.

"With what I have that will be enough," Nancy said briskly. "I'll pay you both back when we get home."

"No you won't," George protested. "We're all in on this."

"Fine!" Nancy smiled. "You girls stay here with Honey. I'll hurry

back as quickly as I can."

"Honey's mother may not like our interfering," Bess ventured doubtfully.

"I'll be tactful," Nancy promised.

Honey followed her to the car, eying Nancy with worshipful eyes.

"I like ice cream," she ventured with a timid smile.

"I'll bring some," Nancy said. "And plenty of other good things. A bone, with meat on it, for Hans, too!"

She drove away swiftly. A quarter mile down the road she caught sight of a woman trudging along dejectedly. Honey's mother!

Nancy was quick to observe the downcast expression on the woman's face and guessed that she had received no word from her husband. Undoubtedly Mrs. Swenson had hoped that he would send money so that she might purchase food.

"Poor thing!" Nancy thought. "I don't believe I can ever bring myself to tell her about the diary. If her husband has done wrong, it will break her heart."

Pulling over to the side of the road, she called a cheery greeting. Mrs. Swenson started in surprise as she recognized Nancy.

"Won't you let me drive you home?" Nancy asked her.

"But you're going in the opposite direction," Mrs. Swenson protested.

"Oh, that's perfectly all right," Nancy replied, as the woman wearily climbed in beside her.

"I'm on my way to town to buy some things," Nancy explained, "but as soon as I've purchased them, I'll take you straight home. You won't mind the extra ride, will you?"

"Indeed I won't." Mrs. Swenson smiled faintly. "I don't feel as though I could walk another step. I must get home soon, though, for my little girl hasn't had her supper."

Nancy wondered what would be the best way in which to broach the plan to Mrs. Swenson about the "feast."

"Well, here goes!" Nancy thought. "If she refuses, there's nothing the girls and I can do except return home."

CHAPTER VII

A Disclosure

AFTER outlining her plan for the supper party, Nancy waited expectantly for Mrs. Swenson's response. During the moment of silence, she clearly read the woman's thoughts. She was battling with her pride.

"How kind of you to take an interest in us!" Mrs. Swenson said at last. "I appreciate it more than I can tell you."

"Then I may go ahead with my shopping?" Nancy asked eagerly.

"Yes, it will be wonderful to have a 'feast,' as you call it. We haven't had one since my husband left." Mrs. Swenson caught herself quickly, and said, "Joe is away looking for work. I'm sure he'll send me money in a few days and then I can repay you for—"

"Oh, but this is a special party," Nancy interrupted gaily. "You mustn't think of repaying me."

During the ride to town, Mrs. Swenson seldom spoke. She leaned wearily against the cushion, a half-smile playing over her pale face. Her weary blue eyes were kind, but the privations brought on by poverty and worry had stamped grim lines about her mouth.

Nancy parked the convertible on the main street of Sandy Creek and insisted that Mrs. Swenson assist her in selecting the food for the feast. They chose a quantity of staples, then Nancy added as many luxuries as she could afford —ice cream, a thick juicy steak, fresh fruit and vegetables, cake and an assortment of melons.

"You're buying enough to last a week!" Mrs. Swenson declared.

That was exactly what Nancy had intended to do. Not until she had practically exhausted her funds would she listen to the other's

protests.

"If it weren't for Honey, I never would permit you to spend money on us," Mrs. Swenson said as they climbed into the car. "We're not accustomed to accepting charity. When my husband was employed, we lived well. We should still be well off if he hadn't been cheated out of his rights!"

This gave Nancy an opening, and as they drove back toward Riverwood Cottage she diplomatically questioned the woman. Mrs. Swenson, however, revealed very little about her husband. She seemed eager to impress Nancy with his kindness, rather than his apparent irresponsibility.

"Joe has always been good to me and he adores Honey. Some folks say he's lazy, but that isn't true. He's always worked—harder than most folks. He's an inventor, and if he hadn't been cheated out of his patents, we'd be wealthy—"

She broke off as the convertible turned a corner and a voice called out, "Hi, Nancy!"

"Ned Nickerson!" she exclaimed, and pulled to the curb behind Ned's parked car.

With a pleased grin which spread over his entire face, Ned jumped from behind the wheel and came hurrying toward the convertible.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Oh, just prowling about." Nancy laughed. She introduced Mrs. Swenson, then said, "What are *you* doing in Sandy Creek?"

"On an errand for my mother. I'm about to rush home for something to eat. I'm nearly starved."

"Better come with us," Nancy proposed impetuously. "We're having a feast at Mrs. Swenson's."

Ned accepted the invitation without an instant's hesitation, and promised to follow in his car as soon as he had phoned home.

It was only a short distance to the cottage, and Mrs. Swenson showed no inclination to resume the interrupted conversation. Nancy had hoped that she would tell more about her husband's work, but the woman did not volunteer any additional information.

"I'll talk to Mrs. Swenson about it before I leave the cottage," Nancy promised herself. "I must get to the bottom of the mystery."

The few hints that Mrs. Swenson had dropped only served to trouble Nancy further. Since Joe Swenson was an inventor, it seemed

reasonable that he had gone to Mr. Raybolt to retrieve something of his. If no one were home, he might have become a housebreaker, then an arsonist. Nancy suddenly chided herself.

"I mustn't have such thoughts! Time enough to draw conclusions when I've heard Mr. Swenson's side of the story! Right now, I'll say nothing to ruin our little party."

As Nancy parked in front of Riverwood Cottage, Bess, George, and Honey came running to see what she had brought. The little girl squealed with delight as she peered into the various packages.

"You didn't forget Hans's bone?" she asked.

"I should say not," Nancy told her. "The butcher gave us the best one he had."

Ned arrived, and everyone helped carry in the bundles. As Nancy stepped into the cottage it was her turn to be surprised. During her absence the girls had decorated the living-dining room with flowers from the garden and had brought out the best china, a lovely set of delftware.

"What beautiful dishes!" Nancy exclaimed admiringly.

"They're all I have left of our good possessions," Mrs. Swenson said. "The set was given to me as a wedding present. I must sell the dishes soon, but I keep putting it off."

"It seems a shame to sell a wedding gift," Bess remarked sympathetically. "Especially such a lovely one as this."

Under the influence of the young people, Mrs. Swenson brightened. It was impossible to be downhearted around Ned and Nancy, who kept up a constant stream of good-natured banter. Mrs. Swenson, an excellent cook, took charge of preparing the meal, but she had four able assistants. Honey and Hans hovered near the stove where the steak was sizzling.

"Hans has his canine eye on another bone!" Ned laughed. "Well, he won't get it until we've picked it bare."

Nancy had not misnamed the supper, for it really was a feast. There was plenty of everything and it was a pleasure to see Honey's eyes grow big at the sight of each steaming dish that was brought to the table.

It was a happy meal, and Ned proved to be a very interesting dinner companion. Even Mrs. Swenson's sober face lighted up and she ate her food with enjoyment. Nancy entered into the lighthearted conversation, but her mind was far from carefree. Several times during

the meal George gazed at her significantly as though to ask what she intended to do about the diary. The girls had come to Sandy Creek to learn certain facts, but now that they realized how affairs were at the Swenson cottage, it seemed unkind to bring further trouble upon the family.

"I want to show you my little baby chicks," Honey announced when the meal was over. "I have ten yellow ones—all my own."

Ned, Bess, and George obligingly followed the child outside.

"Coming?" Bess asked Nancy.

"No, I'll stay and help with the dishes."

Nancy felt that it was her opportunity to talk with Mrs. Swenson alone. Yet, after the others had gone, she did not know how to launch the important subject. As she scraped the dishes, she cautiously broached the subject of nationalities.

"We're Swedish," Mrs. Swenson declared. "You probably guessed that."

Nancy had, but her heart sank at the definite assertion.

"You speak perfect English," she replied.

"My husband is a university man," the woman returned proudly. "He has always corrected my English and helped me with it."

"What were the other names in your families?" Nancy asked, smiling.

"My maiden name was the same as that of Joe's mother—Dahl." Nancy stifled a gasp. The ring with the initial "D" must have been inherited by Joe Swenson! Now she *must* find out about the diary!

"I've often heard that people who move to this country keep diaries. Did your family follow the custom?" Nancy inquired, trying to make her question sound uninquisitive.

"The Swensons always did, even at home. My husband kept a diary in which he also told of his inventions. He hoped that this would help keep his ideas safe. But—" Mrs. Swenson stopped speaking and gazed into space.

Nancy pretended not to notice the long pause. Finally she asked, "Did your husband always carry the diary with him?"

"Yes, he did."

At this affirmation of her suspicions, Nancy almost dropped a plate. She quickly caught it, but thought, "Evidence is piling up against Joe Swenson at an alarming rate!"

Presently Mrs. Swenson spoke again. “Nancy, I can’t understand why I haven’t heard from my husband,” she confided. “Joe has been gone a month. He was sure of finding work and promised to send money home. But I haven’t had a single letter from him. That’s the reason I went to the post office today. But there was no mail for me. Oh, Nancy, I’m so worried about Joe. Something may have happened to him!”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Nancy said quickly.

Mrs. Swenson grabbed the girl’s arm. “Why do you say that?” she cried out. “Do you know something about Joe?”

Nancy was dumfounded. What was she going to say now?

CHAPTER VIII

Worried Sleuths

TAKING a deep breath, Nancy put an arm around Mrs. Swenson. “I’m sure your husband carried identification. If anything had happened to him, surely you would have been notified by this time.”

“But what about his not writing to me?” Mrs. Swenson persisted. “It’s unlike Joe not to keep a promise.”

“Well, that puzzles me too,” Nancy confessed. “But I’m sure you’ll hear from him soon.”

“Oh, I hope so. It should have been easy for Joe to find work, because he’s very skillful. But as I told you before, he was cheated out of a fair deal on his cleverest invention. Unfortunately, he entrusted the drawings to an unscrupulous man who promised to take out patents for him—but didn’t!”

“How dreadful!” Nancy remarked.

“Yes, the man took the patents out under his own name. He deliberately stole them from Joe.”

“Who is the man?” Nancy asked tensely, yet fearing the answer.

Mrs. Swenson hesitated an instant and then said, “Perhaps I shouldn’t give his name, but since you’ll most likely never see him, it can do no harm. The man who cheated Joe, who broke his spirit, is Felix Raybolt!”

“Felix Raybolt!” Nancy echoed.

She had expected this answer, yet hearing the name gave her a distinct shock.

“Yes,” Mrs. Swenson returned, looking curiously at the girl. “Do you

know him?"

"Only by reputation," Nancy answered. "I did hear that his house burned."

This was news to Mrs. Swenson. "Was anyone hurt?" she asked.

"The police and firemen think the house was unoccupied at the time."

At that moment Honey and her new friends came in from the garden.

"Nancy," Bess said, "don't you think we'd better start for home? The sun is setting and we ought to cross that shaky bridge before dark."

"Yes," Nancy agreed. "We'll leave right away."

While the other girls were gathering their handbags and saying good-by, she found an opportunity to speak to Ned privately.

"Have you heard any news about the Raybolts?" she asked in a low tone.

"Not a word. They haven't been located yet."

Nancy now hurriedly explained that she believed she had found the owner of the ring—Mr. Swenson.

Ned frowned. "This may involve him as a suspect in the fire. What a shame! Mrs. Swenson and Honey are such nice people. I like that little girl a lot."

"So do I," Nancy admitted. "I wish I could do something for them—mainly, prove Joe Swenson's innocent."

"I think you've done a lot already. It's my turn now. Do you suppose they'd be offended if I left five dollars?"

"It would be a blessing, Ned. I don't believe they have a penny in the house. Why not hide it somewhere?"

"That's a good idea," Ned said. "Mrs. Swenson can't very well protest if she doesn't find it until after we're gone!"

Without being detected, Ned managed to slip one corner of the five-dollar bill under the vase of flowers on the table. Then they said good-by, promising to return for another visit.

Nancy had told Ned about the broken-down bridge, and the young man insisted upon accompanying the girls past the detour. They found that the smashed railing had been marked by warning lights. As soon as Nancy had crossed over in safety, Ned waved and drove on ahead.

"He certainly intends to look after you, Nancy," Bess teased

mischievously. “Honestly, he has a terrible case!”

“Hush!” Nancy retorted, but she was not displeased.

As they rode toward River Heights, she told the girls of her talk with Mrs. Swenson.

“Things are beginning to look black for her husband,” Bess declared. “He certainly had a motive if Mr. Raybolt stole the patent to his invention.”

“All the evidence points that way,” Nancy admitted, “and yet I can’t believe he’s guilty.”

“He’ll be sent to jail if he is,” George stated flatly. “What do you intend to do?”

“I don’t know.” Nancy sighed deeply. “I was never in such a quandary in my life! If he goes to prison, Mrs. Swenson and Honey will be without means of support—to say nothing of the family name being clouded.”

“But it isn’t right to protect a criminal,” Bess insisted.

“He’s innocent until proved otherwise,” Nancy reminded her friend. “Before doing anything more, I’m going to have a long talk with Dad.”

By the time the girls arrived in River Heights, darkness had fallen. Nancy dropped her friends at their homes. When she reached her own house, she found Hannah tidying the kitchen.

“Isn’t Dad home yet?” Nancy asked.

“No, he telephoned he wouldn’t be back until late tonight.”

Nancy was disappointed that her father had not returned. It was only a little after eight o’clock, but after talking to the housekeeper a few minutes, Nancy went to her bedroom.

“I’ll have another look at that diary,” she thought. “Perhaps I’ll be able to make something out of it, now that I know more about Joe Swenson.”

For one hour Nancy, with added incentive, patiently applied herself to the task of deciphering the cramped English scrawl. She looked at the drawing again and wondered whether it was a sketch for part of the stolen invention. Finally she was able to distinguish a few paragraphs—mostly notations of supplies purchased from various manufacturing concerns.

“Maybe Joe Swenson found a job in one of those places!” Nancy thought optimistically. “I’ll go from one to another and inquire!”

Any possible lead was welcome at this point, Nancy told herself

excitedly. She scanned the notations again. Her eyes lingered on the name of a company in the small city of Stanford.

“That’s where Mr. Baylor Weston lives—the man who ran into my car,” the young detective murmured. “I’ll go to Stanford first, and see Mr. Weston at the same time!”

When Nancy came down to breakfast the next morning she found a sealed envelope beside her plate. She was mystified to note there was no return address on it.

“A man left the envelope early this morning,” Mrs. Gruen told Nancy.

CHAPTER IX

A Scare

EAGERLY Nancy tore open the envelope and unfolded the sheet inside.

"A bill for the repairs to my car," she told Hannah Gruen. "It sounds very fair. Mr. Baylor Weston—who ran into me—shouldn't mind paying this amount."

The housekeeper laughed. "The garage mechanic was certainly prompt in delivering his bill."

"I asked him to be," Nancy defended the man. "I want to present this bill and the Mapleton garage one right away to Mr. Weston."

"That's the spirit," came a voice from the doorway. "Good morning!" Mr. Drew walked in, kissed Nancy, and asked, "How are you, Hannah?"

Carson Drew took his place at the head of the table, then said, "Nancy, I learned yesterday that Baylor Weston owns an electronics factory in Stanford."

"What a break for me!" Nancy exclaimed. "I can do two errands at once." She told about having seen the name of the Stanford Electronics Company in the diary, and her intention of finding out if Mr. Swenson worked there.

"Excellent idea," said Mr. Drew. "And now for more news."

"You found Mr. Raybolt?" Nancy asked eagerly.

"Yes and no. To be strictly correct, I found *Mrs.* Raybolt."

"Where is she, Dad?"

"At a summer resort on Lake Mentor. I talked with Mrs. Raybolt on

the phone. She became very upset about the fire and told me she would return today to look into the matter."

"And her husband?"

"She didn't say where he is and was rather evasive when I questioned her about him."

"I'd like to talk to Mrs. Raybolt, Dad."

"Well, why don't you? She'll surely stay at the Maplecroft Inn because it's the only hotel within three miles of the Raybolt estate. My guess is that if you go there for luncheon you might meet her."

"That's a grand idea!" Nancy said excitedly. "I see now why you're called River Heights' leading lawyer!"

She asked her father if he knew of someone who could translate the diary. "I've already checked," Mr. Drew replied. "But my two friends who speak Swedish are away on vacation."

Nancy was so enthusiastic about the idea of visiting the inn that as soon as she had finished breakfast, she phoned Bess and George. Always eager for adventure, they quickly said they would love to go along. By eleven o'clock the three girls were en route.

"I have a feeling that we're about to learn something important!" Nancy confided to her friends.

It was only a few minutes after twelve when the girls reached the pleasant little inn. Nancy parked beside a row of cars at the rear of the building. The girls went inside and inquired for Mrs. Raybolt.

"She hasn't arrived yet," the desk clerk said, "but we expect her any minute."

The girls strolled outside and sat down on the porch. But after an hour had elapsed, the wealthy woman still had not arrived. Bess gave a huge sigh. "I'm starved! We may as well have luncheon. I don't believe Mrs. Raybolt is coming."

"It looks that way," Nancy admitted in disappointment. "Wait a second, though, here comes another car."

Hopefully, the girls watched as a large automobile swept up the driveway. A chauffeur assisted a frail, nervous-looking woman of middle age to alight. She clung unsteadily to his arm and for a moment the girls thought she would faint.

The chauffeur said encouragingly, "You'll feel better, Mrs. Raybolt, after you have had your lunch."

So *this* was Mrs. Raybolt! She made no response other than to give a

low moan. Still leaning on the chauffeur's arm, she walked uncertainly up the porch steps.

"Goodness," Bess exclaimed in a whisper, "isn't that poor woman pale? She looks ill. I'm surprised her husband left her alone."

Nancy did not comment. She was watching Mrs. Raybolt closely and it struck her that the woman *was* actually ill. As she reached the porch, Mrs. Raybolt caught hold of a post for support.

"I can't go on," she whispered weakly. Then she fainted.

The chauffeur caught her in his arms as she fell and eased her to the level of the porch. Nancy and her friends, thoroughly alarmed, rushed forward to be of assistance.

"I'll get some water!" Nancy cried, and dashed inside. The desk clerk came rushing out.

"Take her into the manager's office," he suggested kindly. "I'll call a doctor."

The chauffeur quickly explained that they had just been to the scene of the fire. Then Mrs. Raybolt was carried inside and made comfortable on the couch. Her face was pale, but as Nancy applied a wet cloth to her forehead, she revived somewhat.

"Felix!" she moaned. "Oh, Felix!"

"Your husband will be here soon," Nancy assured her soothingly.

Her words had an astounding effect upon the woman. She half raised herself and her eyes, fluttering open, had a wild expression in them.

"My husband is dead," she moaned. "He burned to death."

"She must be hysterical," said the manager's secretary. "I hope the doctor gets here soon."

"Your husband isn't dead," Nancy said comfortingly.

Mrs. Raybolt appeared not to hear the girl, for she went on wildly, "He burned to death in the fire! Oh, Felix!"

"What's she talking about?" demanded the manager, who had just entered the room.

"I'm sure her husband wasn't in the house at the time it burned," said Nancy. "The investigators found no evidence of anyone having been trapped inside."

Yet, as she spoke, doubt besieged Nancy. How did she know that Felix Raybolt had not been trapped inside the house? True, no body

had been found, but what if the explosion—Nancy put the horrible thought out of her mind.

Mrs. Raybolt revived sufficiently to sit up, and after she had drunk the glass of water Nancy handed her, she appeared to be less agitated.

“I can’t go on!” the woman whispered weakly

“You must be mistaken about your husband,” Bess told her gently.

"No! No!" the woman cried. "He went there the night of the fire to see a man on business. I had a feeling he shouldn't go and I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen to me. I haven't heard from Felix since that night."

Mrs. Raybolt broke down and sobbed hysterically. Nancy asked the name of the man whom Felix Raybolt had gone to see.

"I don't know," she replied. "Felix never confided any business matters to me. He resented questions. I do know that Felix was uneasy about the appointment."

"Why?"

"He anticipated possible physical violence."

Nancy and her friends gulped. If the person with whom Mr. Raybolt had an appointment was Joe Swenson, here was still another count against the Swedish inventor.

At that moment the doctor appeared. He briskly cleared the room, insisting that the patient have absolute quiet. Nancy and her friends left with the others.

"Well, what do you think of the case now?" George whispered tensely.

"I think," Nancy returned soberly, "that things look very black for poor Joe Swenson."

The three girls ate luncheon in silence. They did not want to discuss the mystery in public, and were too concerned to talk of anything else.

When they finished eating, Nancy stopped at the reservation desk and asked the clerk for directions to Stanford. "Take the short cut across Sunview Mountain," he advised. "It's half the distance it would be by the main road."

Nancy thanked him and the girls went to the car. As they were about to drive off, a state trooper stopped Nancy and said, "A word of advice, young ladies. We believe a dangerous criminal is hiding in the vicinity. Keep your doors locked."

"What did he do?" Bess asked fearfully.

"It's suspected he's a firebug, a robber, and—well, he may use a gun on anyone who gets in his way."

"What's his name?" Nancy inquired, her heart sinking in the fear that it would be Joe Swenson.

To her relief, the officer replied that the police were still working to establish the man's identity. "But watch your step, and if you should

see anything suspicious, be sure to report it to us."

"I will," Nancy promised, and drove off.

Five miles farther on she turned into the narrow short cut across Sunview Mountain. The twisting road, bordered by tangled undergrowth and dense woods, was deserted.

Bess shivered. "The wildest section in the county!" she exclaimed nervously. "Just the sort of place a criminal would choose for a hideout. For goodness sake, Nancy, step on the gas!"

"This is a spooky road," George murmured presently. "Wouldn't it be funny if we should come upon Joe Swenson, peering out at us from the bushes?"

"Funny?" Bess demanded. "I'd be frightened out of my wits. Wouldn't you, Nancy?"

"Well, I don't know," the other returned truthfully. "I'm eager to find that man."

"So am I," Bess replied, "but I'd rather not run into any stranger in this out-of-the-way spot!"

Nancy did not reply immediately, and her friends noticed that she appeared to be scanning the woods searchingly.

"You think the criminal actually might be hiding along this road?" Bess demanded anxiously.

Nancy nodded. "It's possible."

"Turn back!" Bess pleaded. "No telling what he might do to us!"

"Don't get jittery," Nancy advised. "Remember, we have to find out if Joe Swenson works at the plant in Stanford."

As they drove along the winding road, the three girls maintained a vigilant lookout. Suddenly Bess cried out:

"There's a man ahead, at the side of the road! He's motioning us to stop! Don't do it, Nancy!"

CHAPTER X

A Spooky Shack

INSTINCTIVELY Nancy pressed down hard on the gas pedal and shot past the man. In the rear-view mirror she saw an astonished look on his face. She slowed to a normal pace and laughed in relief.

"A hitchhiker! He probably thinks I'm crazy!"

The stranger did not in the least resemble a criminal type. He looked kind and pleasant.

"Better safe then sorry," Bess defended herself as they left the amazed hitchhiker far behind.

"I'll have to agree with you on that," said George.

Presently Nancy came to a fork in the road and stopped the convertible. There were no signs to indicate which road led toward the Weston factory.

"I'd turn to the left," Bess advised.

"The right-hand turn looks more likely to me," George insisted. "Look—I see a shack over among those trees. Why not inquire there?"

"A good idea!" Nancy approved. She pulled up before the shack and flung open the car door. George did the same and promptly stepped out.

But Bess held back. "No telling who lives there, girls! M-maybe that criminal!"

"George and I will go," said Nancy. "You stay here, Bess."

"Not on your life. If you're going, I'll go, too."

George and Nancy were already pushing their way through the

brush, and Bess, fearful of being left alone, hurried after them. The shack was located in a tiny clearing which was enclosed on three sides by dense forest.

The girls were halfway to the cabin when Bess clutched Nancy's arm. "There's someone in the bushes—over by the grape arbor—watching us!"

The three girls huddled together, afraid to continue. They could see the motionless figure peeping out at them.

Suddenly Nancy burst into laughter.

"A scarecrow!" she exclaimed. "Bess, this makes the second time you've given us a scare!"

Bess looked sheepish and made no response.

"Come on!" George said in disgust. "We're acting like babies!"

The girls approached the shack with a boldness they did not feel. Bess remarked nervously that the place seemed unnaturally quiet.

Summoning her courage, Nancy knocked on the door. There was no response. She knocked again, louder than before.

"I heard someone moving!" George whispered tensely.

Nancy thought she had heard something. A little chill of excitement ran down her spine. Was someone hiding inside?

"Let's go back!" Bess urged fearfully.

"One more try," Nancy begged, and knocked again.

When no answer came, Nancy gently turned the knob. The door opened so quickly she almost plunged headlong into the one-room shack. She sprang back, expecting to face an occupant. The room was empty. The few furnishings were broken down and covered with dust.

"Another joke on us!" Nancy said. "I'd have sworn I heard someone moving in here!"

"So would I," murmured Bess in a relieved tone. "What a creepy place!"

The girls tiptoed around the shack, sidestepping the dirt, and ducking their heads, as they avoided the heavy cobwebs.

"Nobody home!" announced Nancy, gaily shaking off her former apprehensive mood.

"No one has used this shack in months," George declared.

"We may as well run along," said Nancy.

Returning to their car, the girls agreed after some debate to take the right-hand fork. A few minutes' driving took them to the foot of Sunview Mountain.

"I see a town ahead," Nancy observed. "We'll stop there and inquire if we're on the right road."

When they reached the main section of the village, Nancy managed to attract the attention of a policeman, who left his post and came over to the car.

"The road to the Weston factory?" he repeated. "You should have taken the left fork several miles back."

The girls exchanged looks of consternation. After their recent experiences the thought of returning over the same route was cheerless indeed.

"There's another way you can get there," the policeman told them, "but it will take you a little longer."

"That's all right," Nancy said thankfully.

He then explained in detail how they could reach the factory. Nancy thanked him and drove on.

"We'll have to hurry," she remarked to her friends, "or the factory will be closed. Just our luck to take the wrong turn."

Swift driving partially made up for lost time, but Nancy's wrist watch warned her that it was nearly four o'clock when they at last reached the factory on the outskirts of Stanford. It took the girls a few minutes to locate the office.

Nancy presented herself to the young woman in charge, stating that she wished to see Mr. Baylor Weston.

"It's rather late," the secretary informed Nancy with a superior air. "Mr. Weston doesn't like to make appointments after three o'clock."

"We've driven here from River Heights," Nancy explained patiently. "Please give him my name."

The young woman vanished into an inner office. The girls sat down on a bench to wait. Five minutes passed.

"Looks as if we're out of luck," George grumbled. "The man probably suspects what we came for and means to get out of it if he possibly can."

She lowered her voice, for at that moment the secretary returned.

"Mr. Weston will see you," she told Nancy. "Step into his office, please."

If Nancy and the other girls expected to meet a defiant Baylor Weston they were mistaken. His every movement disclosed that he was as intensely nervous as he had been the day of the accident.

Mr. Weston recognized Nancy, and it was not necessary for her to state her mission. Evidently her visit had been anticipated.

He motioned the girls to be seated, and still without speaking, the manufacturer reached for the bills which Nancy held in her hand. He glanced at them and a look of relief came over his face.

"Well, that's not half bad," he remarked, relaxing. "I was sure it would be much more."

Nancy expected Mr. Weston to mention his insurance company's paying the amount, but instead he opened his desk drawer and took out a checkbook. As he wrote in it, he said:

"I'm decidedly pleased that the total expense is so small. The last time I crashed into a car it cost me real money, to say nothing of the threatened lawsuit."

"The last time?" Nancy echoed with a smile.

"I'm very nervous—excitable," the manufacturer reiterated. "Doctor's right—I shouldn't drive a car."

He handed the check to Nancy. "That covers everything?"

"Yes, and thank you. I hope you'll have no more accidents."

"So do I," Baylor Weston returned with a grimace, "but very likely I shall, unless I get a chauffeur. Hm, that's an idea! I'll make a note of it!"

He reached for a pad, and to the amusement of the girls, scribbled down the memorandum.

"By the way," he remarked, "did you hear how much Raybolt lost in the fire?"

"I don't believe the loss has been estimated," Nancy replied. "Mrs. Raybolt visited the ruins today. She was quite overcome."

"The Raybolts always did hate to lose a penny," the manufacturer grunted.

"It wasn't that," Nancy told him. "Mrs. Raybolt declares her husband was in the house at the time of the fire. She believes he was burned to death."

Baylor Weston shook his head doubtfully. "Can't make me believe that Felix Raybolt was caught in that fire. He's too foxy for that! If he has disappeared, you may wager it was for a purpose."

"Mrs. Raybolt's grief seemed to be genuine," Nancy commented.

"No doubt. Raybolt wasn't the fellow to confide in his wife about anything. He kept his own council."

"You knew him well."

"At one time. We broke off business relations years ago. Raybolt was too tricky—mean and unfair in all his dealings. He'd steal ideas without a qualm."

"So I've heard," Nancy returned dryly. "By the way," she asked, "do you have a man by the name of Joe Swenson working for you?"

Mr. Weston thought for a moment, then said, "The name is not familiar to me, but I'll inquire of our personnel office." He called the manager. After a few moments' pause, the answer came back—no.

Nancy was disappointed. She thanked Mr. Weston and the three girls arose. They left the factory and walked to the car.

"Let's take the longer route back to River Heights rather than the Sunview Mountain road," Bess pleaded, and Nancy consented.

As she reached the Weston plant's main gate at the highway, the girls saw that traffic had become heavy.

"Everyone must be coming to town for the carnival," George observed. "I saw the posters advertising it when we drove through Stanford. There's to be some sort of parade, too."

The steady stream of vehicles held the convertible at the entrance of the factory grounds. While the girls were impatiently waiting for a break in the line, the plant whistle blew.

"Now there *will* be a jam!" Nancy exclaimed.

A moment later she finally managed to turn into the highway, but the cars in front of her moved slowly. Again Nancy was forced to halt.

The blowing of the whistle had released hundreds of workmen. They came pouring from the plant. While she waited for the car ahead to move, Nancy watched the men with interest.

Suddenly a vaguely familiar figure caught her eye. At first Nancy thought she must be mistaken, but as the man turned his face toward her, she knew her first impression had been correct.

"Look!" Nancy cried excitedly. "There's the man I saw running away from the fire! He's Joe Swenson!"

CHAPTER XI

Lost in the Crowd

"JOE SWENSON!" Bess and George exclaimed simultaneously. "Where?"

"He's crossing the highway!" Nancy pointed. "The man with the blue shirt. Don't take your eyes off him for a second! We must keep him in sight!"

The cars ahead had started to move again and Nancy turned her attention to driving, while Bess and George watched Joe Swenson. They kept close behind him for nearly a block, then George called out that he had turned a corner.

Nancy stopped for a red traffic light, and when she finally turned into the side street, the man was a considerable distance ahead.

"He's walking fast," Bess observed. "We'll lose him if we aren't careful."

The street was crooked and narrow. Children were playing ball and Nancy was forced to drive with extra caution.

Joe Swenson turned into another street, narrower than the first and rather dingy. Nancy rapidly drew nearer to him, only to lose him again as he cut through an alley.

"Does he know we're following him?" Bess wondered.

"I don't think so," Nancy answered. "We'll catch him at the next street. I can see where the alley ends."

Rubbish, tin cans, and boxes littered the alley, and she did not care to risk a punctured tire. Turning the car, she retraced her route, rounded the block, and reached the opposite end of the alley in time

to see Joe Swenson heading toward one of the main streets of Stanford.

"We have him now," Nancy said confidently.

Scarcely had she spoken when the girls noticed that the block directly ahead had been roped off. The sidewalks were lined with pedestrians, and policemen were turning automobiles into side streets.

"What's this?" Nancy asked impatiently.

"It must be the parade," George declared. "And there goes Joe Swenson, heading that way!"

"We'll lose him sure!" Nancy groaned.

True to her prediction, the man melted into the crowd. A policeman motioned for Nancy to turn to the right and she had no choice but to comply. At the first opportunity she parked the car and the girls ran back.

In vain they searched through the throngs of people watching the parade. Joe Swenson had disappeared.

"If that isn't a mean break!" Bess fretted.

"I admit it's hopeless," Nancy said slowly. "The best thing to do is come back tomorrow and try to find him."

The girls returned to the car. As they headed for River Heights, George said, "If Joe Swenson works at the Weston plant, why wasn't his name on the personnel records?"

"Maybe we were mistaken, after all," Bess said.

Nancy did not reply for nearly a minute, then she declared, "Girls, I have a hunch."

"About what?" George asked.

"That Joe Swenson works at the factory, all right."

"But they said nobody by that name was there," Bess objected.

Nancy smiled. "For reasons of his own, he could be using another name."

"Like what?" George spoke up.

"Dahl," Nancy answered.

"His mother's maiden name!" Bess declared. "Oh, Nancy, you're a genius!"

"Better not praise me until I've proved my hunch right," Nancy cautioned.

"Will you phone Mr. Weston and ask him?"

"No, Bess. I want to talk to Joe Swenson without his suspecting anything. If he's using an assumed name, it may be because he's hiding something. Suppose he finds out someone has been inquiring for him? He may run away."

"You're right," George agreed.

Reluctantly the girls rode back to River Heights. "See you tomorrow," Nancy told Bess and George as she stopped at their homes. Upon reaching the Drew house, she found Hannah Gruen awaiting her with a message.

"Ned Nickerson has phoned you five times, Nancy," Hannah said with a smile. "It seems that he wants to invite you to a dinner dance. One of his fraternity brothers is giving it—on the spur of the moment—tonight. Ned would like you to call. I have the number."

Nancy's heart was already pounding with excitement as she dialed. Of course she would accept!

"Great!" said Ned. "I was about to give up hope. Can you be ready in an hour?"

"I'll do my best," Nancy, replied.

Singing a gay tune, Nancy quickly disrobed, jumped under a shower, and was dressed in three-quarters of an hour.

"You look lovely, Nancy," Mrs. Gruen complimented her.

"Oh, thank you." Nancy surveyed herself in a long mirror. The pale-green chiffon dress was very becoming, and the gold evening shoes she wore set it off to advantage.

Still humming gaily, Nancy went downstairs holding her white wrap. Ned arrived in a few minutes and they drove off in his car. At first conversation was in a light vein, then Ned asked if Nancy had located the Raybolt arsonist yet.

"No. How about you?"

Ned replied, "All I know is what I read in the papers—first, that Mrs. Raybolt remains in a state bordering on collapse. She's firmly convinced her husband lost his life in the fire."

"The police and fire investigators don't think so," Nancy remarked.

"I do have one interesting piece of news. The police are busy working on a new angle. A clue, which they're withholding from the public, is expected to bring about the arrest of the criminal within a day or two."

“Is it possible that the police suspect Joe Swenson?” Nancy asked herself aloud. “If they arrest him, it will ruin all my plans for trying to help his family!”

“You’re being very mysterious,” Ned complained good-naturedly. “Why would the police suspect Mr. Swenson? How about letting me in on the secret?”

Nancy laughed. “Maybe you shouldn’t beg too hard, Ned. You may find yourself being called upon to do all kinds of outlandish sleuthing jobs.”

“I’m at your service,” Ned replied quickly.

Little by little, Nancy told him the details. When she had finished, Ned said, “You’ve certainly done some terrific detective work! Well, good luck tomorrow. Wish I could be with you, but I’m slated to go on an all-day trip with my dad.”

Nancy and Ned reached the home of his fraternity brother. Sounds of popular songs being sung in harmony by the guests drifted out. Laughingly, the couple hastened their steps.

All the boys and girls were strangers to Nancy, but she liked them at once. She found them intelligent and full of fun, and they quickly made her feel as if she had always been part of the group.

At the long dinner table the boy on her right, Phil Roberts, proved to be very entertaining. He told several amusing and true stories about strange letters which had come to the attention of the post office.

“Where did you hear about these letters?” Nancy asked him, after the laughter had subsided.

“Oh, my father’s the Stanford postmaster,” Phil explained. “He told me.”

Immediately Nancy wondered if Phil could have heard anything to shed light on the reason why Mrs. Swenson was not receiving mail from her husband. It took Nancy nearly five minutes to formulate a diplomatic question.

Finally she said, “If someone’s mail isn’t being delivered, what could be the reason?”

Phil smiled. “Two that I can think of. First, no one is writing to the person, and second, his mail is being stolen.” Suddenly he looked intently at Nancy. “What made you ask me that question?”

“Because I know someone who should be getting mail but isn’t. If there were money or checks in the letters, a thief might steal them.”

“A certain kind of thief would. Say, Nancy, I’m going to tell you something—it’s kind of confidential—but I think it might help your friend.”

Nancy listened intently for the secret she was about to hear.

CHAPTER XII

Incriminating Evidence

"FOR several weeks," Phil began, "my father and a good many other postmasters have been receiving reports like the one you've just told me, Nancy. The police and the Postal Inspectors Division have been investigating but haven't caught anyone yet."

"Hm," said Nancy. "Then my friend could easily be one of the victims."

Just then a record of dance music began to play and Ned claimed Nancy. For the remainder of the evening there was no chance to resume the conversation about stolen letters. But throughout the evening, the matter was constantly on her mind. By the time the party was over and she had said good night to Ned, the young sleuth had a theory about the thefts. To start solving this mystery, she must first talk to Joe Swenson.

By ten the following morning Nancy was on her way, with Bess and George in the front seat of the car with her. In her purse was the diary. The cousins were intrigued when Nancy told them about the dinner dance.

"Lucky you!" said Bess, pretending to pout. "Couldn't Ned have found a couple of blind dates for George and me?"

Nancy laughed, then turning serious, said, "If we find Joe Swenson, I'm going to ask him point-blank if he has mailed any letters containing money to his wife."

She did not explain her reason for this, not wishing to betray Phil's confidence about the money, money orders, and checks being stolen from mail.

“Suppose he says yes,” George suggested.

“Then I’ll ask him where he mails his letters and try a little detective work to see what happens.”

The first shift of noonday lunchers was trickling from Mr. Weston’s factory as Nancy parked nearby. Soon the recreation area was filled with men. Some seated themselves on the ground to eat. Others began to play ball.

“It won’t be easy to find Joe Swenson in such a large group,” Nancy declared in disappointment. “If we had arrived fifteen minutes earlier, we could have spotted him as he came out of the building.”

Nevertheless, the girls eagerly scanned the faces of the workmen. A number of them had gathered near a drinking fountain, but Joe Swenson was not among this group. Not discouraged, the girls began to walk about, inquiring for a man named Dahl. The men they questioned had never heard of him.

“I’m sure he works here,” Nancy declared to her friends.

Workmen passing to and fro stared curiously at the girls, obviously wondering what had brought them to the electronics plant.

Nancy was becoming a bit disheartened, when she chanced to observe a light-haired man leaning dejectedly against the high fence which surrounded the grounds. Apparently the man had picked an isolated, tree-shaded spot, away from the other workers. He had his back to the girls, but from a distance Nancy thought his tall, spare build was exactly like that of the stranger she had seen running away from the fire. Could he be Honey’s father?

She watched expectantly, and presently the man turned around. He was the same person she had seen on the previous day’s visit to the factory. Nancy could not mistake the face—he was Joe Swenson.

“You girls stay here a moment, will you?” Nancy requested. “I think I’ve found our man. I must speak to him alone. Be on your guard, and if he tries to escape, block the exit to the grounds. I don’t think he’ll make a disturbance, but if he’s guilty, he may attempt a getaway!”

Nancy’s heart beat faster than usual as she approached the man who was leaning against the fence. His downcast manner, the girl thought, could mean a guilty conscience.

“I beg your pardon,” Nancy said courageously, “but aren’t you Mr. Joe Swenson—alias Dahl?”

The man wheeled around, but held his ground. After the first start of surprise, Nancy thought he did not look unusually disturbed at the

sudden encounter.

"Yes," he replied, "Dahl's my name. Anything I can do for you?"

For a moment Nancy was at a loss for words. She had half expected that Joe Swenson would be defiant and sullen—not a sad-eyed, kindly man. He looked to her as though he could not have harmed anyone in his life.

"It's all a mistake," Nancy told herself joyfully. "Mr. Swenson is innocent. He didn't start the Raybolt fire."

The next moment she had regained her composure and was again the impartial, businesslike detective. She showed him her driver's license for identification.

"I have news of your wife," Nancy said to him quietly.

"Helen?" the man demanded eagerly, his face lighting up. "She's not ill, I hope!"

"Oh, no," Nancy assured him, "but she's dreadfully worried about you and is trying to locate you."

"I don't understand," Joe Swenson said, frowning. "I sent my address but didn't want to go home until—er—a certain matter was cleared up."

"Then you *have* written to your wife?" Nancy questioned.

"Yes, twice. I sent her two good-sized money orders."

For a second Nancy wondered if he was telling the truth. Looking him straight in the eye, she said, "Mrs. Swenson never received them."

"What!" her husband exclaimed in such genuine astonishment that Nancy had no further doubts.

"They need money badly," Nancy said, and summoned her friends to come forward. She introduced Bess and George, then repeated what Joe Swenson had told her.

"Your letters have been *stolen!"* George said vehemently.

"But how? Where?" the inventor cried out. "I mailed them in the post office myself!"

No one could answer this puzzle. Suddenly he pulled an unsealed envelope from his pocket.

"Here is another letter to my wife with twenty-five dollars in it. I was going to send a money order today. Would you be so kind as to deliver this in person?"

"I'll be glad to," Nancy answered, smiling, and tucked the envelope

in her pocket.

She then changed the subject to obtain more information on another topic. “Would you mind telling us, Mr. Swenson, why you’re using the name Dahl here?”

“Certainly. I’m an inventor, and I’ve had hard luck. The name Joe Swenson seems to have brought trouble. My mother’s people were always successful. On the spur of the moment I decided to use that name here. A man I know vouched for me, since I didn’t have any references to give.”

“I see,” said Nancy. She smiled disarmingly. “Your wife told me of some unfair dealings you’ve had with a man who buys patents.”

“Indeed they were unfair. He cheated me. Felix Raybolt is a thief!”

The three girls were unprepared for such an outburst from this seemingly mild-mannered man. Apparently he guessed what was going through their minds.

“I shouldn’t burden you with my problems,” he said apologetically. “Things aren’t any easier, even though I have a job. Did you know the Raybolt house burned?”

“Yes.”

“To be truthful I am afraid I may be blamed if anyone finds out I was there.”

“You were there?” Bess asked, a look of feigned innocence in her big blue eyes.

“I had an appointment with Mr. Raybolt early that evening,” Joe Swenson explained. “The house was dark. I had just rung the bell when there was a terrific explosion inside the house, and it burst into flames. I called and called to Mr. Raybolt—but there was no answer.”

“Did you try to break in to help?” George asked bluntly.

“Yes, but I couldn’t budge the front door. I ran around to the back. Because of the flames, I knew I couldn’t do any good. Then I heard a car approaching the house. It occurred to me I might be blamed, so I ran away.”

“Did you see anyone on the grounds?” Nancy asked.

“No.”

“Do you think Mr. Raybolt lost his life in the fire?” Nancy asked.

“I really don’t know. I didn’t see or hear him inside, and the police haven’t located any evidence,” the inventor replied.

Nancy had been endeavoring to formulate an honest opinion of the man's story. Her hand went to her purse but she did not bring forth the diary. From their casual conversation so far, she could not be absolutely certain that Joe Swenson was innocent. She must question him further.

"They've been searching the grounds for clues," Nancy said nonchalantly. "A number of articles have been picked up in the vicinity."

Swenson looked sharply at Nancy, as though it had dawned on him that he indeed might be under suspicion. However, his next words were spoken casually.

"I wonder if a diary was found. I lost one. Probably dropped it along the road."

Nancy made no move to give him the diary, although she was convinced that it was his.

"I hated to lose that little journal," Joe Swenson continued. "It was written mostly in Swedish and wouldn't be of any value except to myself—and to Felix Raybolt. That sly fox!"

"What has the diary to do with Mr. Raybolt?" Nancy asked.

"The diary contains—" Joe Swenson hesitated. "Well, it contains things Felix Raybolt wishes were not written down. That man cheated me out of a fortune, but I haven't a chance to prove my case without the diary and without money to retain a lawyer. To make matters worse, I've even lost a ring I treasured highly."

He made a hopeless gesture and lapsed into gloomy silence.

Again Nancy's hand went to the diary in her purse. Again she hesitated. Suppose Joe Swenson were guilty, and she was withholding evidence from the police! Nancy made a quick decision: to hold onto the journal until the truth was learned.

Before she could question the man further, the return-to-work whistle blew a shrill blast.

"I must go now," Swenson said hurriedly.

"When are you off duty?" Nancy asked.

"Four o'clock."

"Then perhaps we'll see you again before we return to River Heights." Noticing the man's surprise, she added quickly, "Wouldn't you like me to carry a message to Mrs. Swenson and Honey?"

"Thank you. But I'll write to them again."

Nancy and her friends watched him until he had disappeared inside the building. The girls then walked slowly back to the car.

“I’ll bet,” said George, “that Joe Swenson is worried about the fire, and will run away again.”

Nancy remained silent, in deep thought. Just as she reached the convertible someone grabbed her arm roughly. She turned to face a tough, cruel-looking man.

CHAPTER XIII

The Law Takes Over

"LET go of me!" Nancy cried out, and tried to shake off the man's iron grip. When she did not succeed, Bess and George started pounding the man and forced him to release Nancy's arm.

"What do you want?" Nancy demanded indignantly.

"Some information. Why are you snooping around here?" the stranger snarled.

"Are you a factory guard?" Nancy countered, knowing from his clothes and manner that he most certainly was not.

"Why—uh—yes. That's what I am. And I got a right to know why you been talkin' to that workman."

"The conversation was private," Nancy told the man firmly. "Now if you'll just move—"

For a moment the obnoxious stranger did not seem inclined to do so, but finally he strode off down the street. The girls stepped into the car and drove away.

"Nancy, aren't you worried?" Bess asked. "That man was positively horrible."

"Yes, I am, Bess. Because I'm more certain than ever that Joe Swenson is in some kind of jam."

"If we can see him at four o'clock, I'm going to ask him about that crude person," declared George. "Say, Nancy, where are you going now?"

"Yes, where?" Bess echoed. "I'm starving!"

Nancy laughed. "I could use some lunch myself. After that, I'll

introduce myself to Phil Roberts' father."

"The Stanford postmaster!" Bess exclaimed. "Nancy, you're not transferring your affections from Ned to Phil already!"

"Nothing like that," Nancy assured her with a grin. "I have a little scheme I'd like to try out and I need his cooperation."

Nancy stopped speaking as she drove into a public parking lot next to a tearoom. The girls went inside and were fortunate to be seated at the last available table. It was such a noisy place that the girls did not try to talk.

Half an hour later they came out of the tearoom, glad to breathe the fresh air and escape the din. Since the post office was close by, the girls walked there. Seeing a door sign marked:

PRIVATE
POSTMASTER

Nancy went to it and knocked. Presently it was opened by a pleasant, middle-aged man.

"I'm Nancy Drew from River Heights," she said, smiling. "I met your son Phil at a party."

"Oh, yes! Phil told me. Won't you come in?"

After the girls had entered and the door had been closed, Nancy introduced her friends.

"I've come on an unusual errand, Mr. Roberts," Nancy said. "A man I know who works at Stanford Electronics has sent two letters containing money orders from here. Neither has been received. Probably all your employees are above suspicion, but would you mind if I make a little experiment?"

The postmaster smiled. "What kind of experiment?"

"I'll mail a note to the man's wife with a money order in it from your office," Nancy explained. "Could you possibly find out if that letter is sent out from here?"

Mr. Roberts looked intently at Nancy. "You're a very ingenious young lady," he remarked. "And if the letter does leave here, then you'll check with the receiving post office to find out if it has reached there?"

"Yes. The family of this man is desperately in need of receiving money from him. I'm trying to help them."

"And I'll help too," the postmaster said suddenly. "Now, will you please give me the name and address of this woman?"

Nancy took Joe Swenson's unsealed envelope from her purse and Mr. Roberts copied the two names and addresses on it. As he handed it back, he said, "Mail this at once." Then he added, "If you come back in a couple of hours, I'll have a report for you—after I personally examine all the outgoing mailbags."

"I'll be here." Nancy thanked the postmaster and the three girls went into the main lobby. There, Nancy bought the twenty-five-dollar money order, kept the purchaser's receipt, and tucked the other section, properly filled out, into the letter. Then she sealed the envelope and slipped the letter into the nearby slot.

When the girls reached the street, Bess said, "That was a daring thing to do, Nancy. Suppose the letter is intercepted, and the money order cashed by some unscrupulous person?"

"If that happens, I'll make good on the money. Right now, tell me, where are we going to spend two hours?"

George suggested attending a movie across the street, and the girls went into the theater. They became so interested in the historical mystery film that the time flew by. The feature ended just as the two hours were up, and the girls hurried back to Mr. Roberts' office.

Again he opened the door. The postmaster was not alone. A policeman stood guarding a man who sat dejectedly in a chair, his face in his hands. He looked up at Nancy, hate blazing in his eyes. The money-order clerk!

"Nancy Drew, thank you for leading us to this thief!" the postmaster said. "Ralph Ringman has confessed to taking not only the letter you mailed, but all money orders of any size. He has two accomplices, a man and a woman, who go to various towns and cash the money orders."

"I'm not the only employee in on this deal," Ringman cried out.

Mr. Roberts smiled. "I figured that might be the case, and have notified other postmasters who have had complaints of undelivered money orders to try the same ruse that Nancy Drew suggested."

At that moment the phone rang. Mr. Roberts answered it. "Yes, Clyde.... You did? ... Good! I guess that little racket is over with."

When he hung up, Mr. Roberts reported to the others that Ringman's outside accomplices had just been arrested by the police and had confessed their parts in the scheme.

On a hunch, Nancy told about the rough-looking man who had questioned her. "Was he in league with Ralph Ringman?" she asked the postmaster.

“That’s right.” Mr. Roberts turned to the prisoner. “You’ll be interested to hear that your pal meant to double-cross you. He planned to hold up Swenson at the plant and grab Swenson’s money for himself. Just as he was about to emerge from his hiding place in the shrubbery nearby, Miss Drew and her friends came along. When he overheard the conversation about the stolen mail, he got panicky. That’s why he followed Miss Drew and accused her of snooping.”

"Nancy Drew, thank you for leading us to this thief," said the postmaster

"The low-down sneak!" snarled Ringman.

Mr. Roberts said that a man from the Postal Inspectors Division

would take custody of the prisoner. “By the way,” he said to Nancy, “do you still want Mr. Swenson’s letter sent?”

“Yes, if it’s safe. I’ll give the money order receipt to him.” Nancy glanced at her watch. “We must hurry,” she said. “Thank you, Mr. Roberts. Please give my regards to Phil.”

The girls hurried off. At a traffic light they paused, waiting for it to turn green. Behind them stood two men conversing in low voices.

“Where’d you get the tip?” one asked.

“From Raybolt’s wife. She said the man who set fire to the house had an appointment with him there that evening.”

“I heard he ran away. Where’d he go?”

“Nobody knows. But we tracked him here. He’s working at the electronics factory under an assumed name.”

“What is it?”

“We don’t know. But we have the man’s description. We’ll have him in jail by tonight!”

Nancy, Bess, and George hardly breathed during this recital. Did these men mean Joe Swenson?

CHAPTER XIV

An Arrest

THE traffic light turned green and the three girls began to cross the street. Nancy made a point of staying in front of the two men who had said they were going to see that someone, presumably Joe Swenson, was arrested.

"Who are these men?" she wondered. "Detectives? Or are they in the employ of Raybolt? If Mr. Swenson is innocent, he mustn't be sent to jail!"

Nancy immediately made up her mind what she would do: meet Honey's father if possible, show him the diary, and ask him to translate some of it. "Then I'll decide what to do next, and whether or not to warn Mr. Swenson of his possibly being arrested. He and his family shouldn't have to suffer such disgrace if it's unwarranted!"

When the girls reached the opposite curb, Nancy took her friends' arms and whispered, "Come on! Hurry! We have work to do!"

They ran to Nancy's car. Nancy handed the keys to George. "Will you drive, so I'll be free to hop out and get hold of Mr. Swenson the instant he comes to the gate?"

George took the wheel and they made record time to the factory. She parked in the first space beyond the front of the gate, and left the engine running.

"You girls watch for those men we overheard. I'll look for Joe Swenson," Nancy directed.

As she spoke, the four-o'clock whistle blew.

"He'll be out any minute now!" George exclaimed.

Anxiously the girls scanned the faces of the workmen as they came from the building. “Where is he?” Bess fretted.

At that moment Nancy caught sight of the inventor. She alighted and called his name. With a smile of friendly recognition, he came over to the car.

“Jump in!” Nancy invited, indicating the rear seat. “We’ll give you a lift.”

“Why, thanks,” the inventor returned gratefully. “I live on the south side. Another fellow and I share a room at the outskirts of town. I imagine it’s out of your way—”

“Not at all,” Nancy assured him with a worried glance up and down the street.

In her haste to leave the plant area, Nancy climbed in and almost pulled the man in after her. She asked George to press the button to roll up the convertible’s top.

“A man certainly appreciates a ride home after a hard day on his feet,” Swenson remarked, leaning back against the cushion. “I’m not yet accustomed to standing eight hours, but I’ll be all right in a week or so. I’m glad to earn a little money by any means, after being out of work for so long.”

As George drove down the street, Nancy said, “Mr. Swenson, the mystery about your lost letters has been solved.” Quickly she explained about the mail clerk who had been arrested.

The inventor was shocked, and shook his head sadly. “I’m glad he has been caught. But what an unfortunate thing for him to do. He probably has a family—they’ll have to suffer with him. Crimes, big or little, are so useless. Whatever profits they may bring are always temporary.”

Nancy nodded. She was becoming more convinced every minute that Joe Swenson was an honest person!

“I have another surprise,” she said. “Your diary was picked up near the drive to the Raybolt house.” She took the journal from her handbag. “Would you mind translating some of the Swedish for me?”

“My diary! Oh, how lucky!” Almost affectionately he began to turn the pages. “Here is an item about Honey’s birthday. How she loved the little toy I made for her! I was always planning to try to market those mechanical dolls, but I never got to it.”

George interrupted to ask which direction to take, and Nancy said, “Oh, let’s just ride out into the country.”

She wanted to elude the men who intended to arrest Mr. Swenson until she could make up her mind what to do. Suddenly the inventor's face darkened. "Here's a note about Felix Raybolt." He translated, "'I have been warned by my friend Anson Heilberg not to let Raybolt see my invention but I shall take a chance. I must because I need money for rent and food. He will give me an advance.' "

Mr. Swenson remarked bitterly, "How I wish I had listened to Anson! Felix Raybolt would not give me another cent or any part of a royalty from the use of my electrochemical process for putting a ceramic finish on steel!"

"How terribly unfair!" Bess cried out, and the other girls expressed the same opinion.

Nancy then told the inventor that a friend of hers had found the signet ring. "I'll see that it is returned to you," Nancy assured him.

"Well, that is good news," said Mr. Swenson.

Nancy gradually switched the conversation to the Raybolt fire, and said, "The investigators report that the explosions in the house could have been caused by a freak accident: a television set not working properly; a defective electronic heating device setting off some kind of explosive stored in the cellar. Mr. Swenson, have you any idea *what* really happened at the Raybolts'?"

Mr. Swenson looked at Nancy searchingly. "My answer might explain a good many angles to the case," he said slowly. "As you probably know, it's against the law to store explosives without a permit. I believe Felix Raybolt was breaking that law. He probably was in the house waiting for me and accidentally caused the explosion himself!"

"But they found no evidence of—of a body," Bess spoke up with a shudder.

"Mr. Raybolt undoubtedly escaped, and then disappeared, knowing he would be arrested," the inventor said vehemently.

"But you didn't *see* him run out?" Nancy queried.

"No."

"We should have looked for footprints, but I guess it's too late now," Nancy remarked.

"Oh, why didn't we think of that!" Bess murmured. She had turned around to watch out the rear window for any pursuers. Suddenly she gasped. "Police!"

George had just passed a side road. From it shot a car with two state

troopers. When it turned in their direction, George said grimly, "I hope they're not after us."

All the occupants of the convertible grew tense, but Nancy said, "Just keep going at this same speed. Let's not act guilty."

By this time she was convinced of Mr. Swenson's innocence, and hoped fervently that the officers were not pursuing her car. Nancy doubted they would take her word about the truth of the inventor's story.

"Maybe they're after someone else—for speeding," Bess said, though without conviction.

Nancy stole a glance out the rear window. Her spirits sank. The State Police car was gaining on them, but did not look as though it was going to pass the convertible.

An uneasy thought crossed Nancy's mind. "If those troopers *are* after Joe Swenson, then George, Bess, and I might be arrested for aiding a suspected criminal to escape!"

George was forced to slow down for a sharp curve. Directly beyond it, two men were driving a small herd of cattle across the highway.

"What luck!" George cried, slowing down.

She honked her horn and tried to edge through, but only succeeded in frightening the cows so that they stood motionless. The convertible came to a halt. Behind it, the police car drew nearer.

Nancy had a sudden impulse to tell Joe Swenson to duck down out of sight, then checked herself. Such an action would indeed make the officers suspicious. Instead, she slipped the diary into her handbag.

Nancy glanced at her companion. Mr. Swenson's face was grim. The police car pulled up alongside the convertible. Nancy's heart was in her throat, but she tried not to show any agitation.

The two herdsmen had headed the cows off to the side of the road. Affecting nonchalance, George started to drive off. But a shout from the troopers' car stopped her.

"Hold on!" one of the officers cried out. "Pull over!"

"They *were* following us," Bess groaned.

Quickly Nancy whispered to Joe Swenson, "Don't worry. We'll stick by you."

The officers had jumped out. They strode up to the convertible.

"We've had a call to pick up this car," said one, while the other thrust his face through the open rear-door window and peered intently

at Mr. Swenson.

"This is the man!" he declared.

"What do you mean?" Nancy demanded coolly, with as much conviction as she could muster.

"Are you Joe Swenson?" the trooper barked, ignoring Nancy's question.

"Yes."

"You are wanted by the Mapleton police for deliberately setting the Raybolt house on fire."

At this accusation the girls gasped and Joe Swenson blanched. Then a flush of anger mounted to his cheeks.

"What nonsense is this? You haven't a shred of proof. I don't know anything about the fire. You have the wrong man."

"Well, you can explain that at headquarters. You'll have to come along with us. The less trouble you make, the better it will go for you."

One of the troopers flipped a pair of handcuffs from his pocket. Joe Swenson shrank back.

"Don't put them on, please! I'll come without any trouble."

"O.K. But don't try any funny stunts. Climb out and be quick about it!"

"Just a minute, Officer," Nancy interposed. "Aren't you making a mistake? I feel sure Mr. Swenson isn't the man you're after. Please let him go free. I'll be responsible for his appearance in court."

Joe Swenson added, "I started working at Baylor Weston's factory just recently. I don't mind answering your questions, but if I'm detained in jail, I'll lose my job."

Protest was useless. Joe Swenson gave Nancy a courageous, apologetic smile, and alighted.

"You girls will have to come along too!" the officer announced. "Drive on ahead, and not too fast! You have some explaining to do too. Don't try to get away!"

CHAPTER XV

Nancy Is Accused

"THIS is an outrage!" Bess gasped. "You mean we actually must go to police headquarters?"

"I'm sorry I involved you girls in this," Joe Swenson murmured. He turned pleadingly to the officers. "It wasn't their fault. They merely offered me a ride."

"They'll all have to come to headquarters for questioning," the officer insisted.

Mr. Swenson was escorted to the State Police car. Before the troopers started off, they again cautioned George to drive ahead slowly.

"For two cents I *would* step on the gas and try to get away!" she fumed to her companions.

"I wouldn't advise it," Bess said uneasily. "We're in enough trouble now."

"Oh, Bess! I was only kidding," George retorted.

The three girls fell into gloomy silence. The prospect of unpleasant notoriety for their families was anything but reassuring. The friends were glad that at least they had been permitted to drive a short way ahead of the police car, for their entry into Mapleton attracted less attention than would otherwise have been the case.

When they reached headquarters and parked, Nancy warned, "Whatever happens, don't say anything that will incriminate Joe Swenson!"

Outside the building, the girls were confronted by the two men they

had overheard talking in Stanford.

"This is our man, all right!" one of them said as the troopers' car bearing Joe Swenson pulled up. The inventor was hustled out, and into the custody of the men.

"Trying to help Swenson make a getaway, eh?" the other of the pair accused the girls. "Come along, you three!"

"Plain-clothes detectives!" Nancy murmured.

As they went up the steps, George teased, "What would Ned Nickerson think if he could see his Nancy now!"

"If it comes to the worst, we can call on him." Nancy smiled. "Before we're through, you may be glad he is my friend!"

Inside headquarters, the situation lost all suggestion of humor. Here Nancy and her friends were told by Police Captain Johnson that the detectives had learned at the plant of Joe Swenson's departure in a car bearing Nancy's license number. He made no reference to the detectives' source of information. To the girls' dismay, the inventor was booked on a charge of arson.

No charge was placed against them, but the girls were asked a great many questions, and their names and addresses were written down. When Nancy gave hers, significant looks were exchanged among the captain and the detectives, Davil and Rock. After that, the girls were treated less peremptorily.

But if they had hoped that the name of Drew would release them at once, Nancy and the cousins were disappointed. They were informed that they must submit to further questioning.

George and Bess were thoroughly frightened and Joe Swenson had become so agitated that he could not speak in a normal tone of voice. Nancy realized that he was in no condition to defend himself. The four were given chairs opposite the two stern-faced detectives and their captain.

One could have heard a pin drop, the room became so quiet. The officers stared fixedly at Joe Swenson, who squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. Suddenly Detective Davil pointed an accusing finger, and his voice rasped out so sharply that Nancy jumped.

"Swenson, when did you first plot the death of Felix Raybolt?"

"When did I—I don't know what you mean," Mr. Swenson stammered.

The keen glance of his questioner did not waver.

"You know well enough what I mean. It won't do you any good to try to lie. You were seen near the Raybolt estate on the day of the fire."

"Who says I was there?" Swenson demanded. "You're accusing me because you can't find the real criminal!"

His shot went home, for the detective blinked, briefly nonplused. But he went on, "You were seen by the railroad station agent, and as soon as he identifies you, we'll have you behind bars. Now out with your story! It will go easier for you if you make a complete confession."

"There's nothing to confess," Swenson returned bitterly. "I *did* go to the Raybolt estate—"

Nancy's heart began to pound. Was the inventor going to confess something he had not told her?

"So!" his questioner cried triumphantly. "Then you admit going to the house!"

"I've admitted nothing damaging!" Swenson retorted hotly. "I went to the house because I had an appointment with Felix Raybolt."

Nancy was sure now that Swenson intended to make a clean breast of everything; and while admiring his honesty, she realized that he was apt to make his case appear worse than it might be. She longed to warn him to remain silent until he could consult a lawyer.

Bess and George sat transfixed.

"So you had an appointment with Raybolt, eh?" Detective Rock took up the questioning. "What kind of appointment?"

"He had a patent of mine and I wanted him to make a settlement."

"Raybolt owed you money?"

"Yes. He stole my invention. I wanted either the money, or my drawings back."

"What did Raybolt say?"

"I never saw him. There were no lights in the house. He didn't answer the bell. Then there was an explosion and I ran away."

"You knew he was in the house and you didn't try to save him?" the captain interjected.

"I don't believe he *was* in the house!"

"When did you last see Raybolt?"

"In a restaurant here in town."

"I see," Detective Davil observed with satisfaction. "You had an argument, didn't you?"

"Yes," Swenson admitted unwillingly, "we did have hot words."

"Which ended in a threat from you," the officer concluded.

Joe Swenson shook his head vehemently. "No, I swear it! I'll tell you everything—right from the very beginning. Raybolt seemed uneasy, as though he were afraid I'd attempt physical violence—he had a guilty conscience, all right!"

"You argued about the invention?"

"Yes. He admitted he had deliberately stolen my ideas, but he defied me to prove anything. That made me angry."

"You threatened him?"

"I told him I would take the matter to court. Of course I didn't have any money to engage a lawyer, but my bluff frightened Raybolt and he told me to come to the house where we could talk privately."

"What do you think caused the fire?" the captain asked.

"The explosion—which nearly knocked me off my feet. I was sort of dazed for several minutes—"

"What happened next?"

"It came over me that if I were found near the place I might be accused of causing the fire. When I heard a car coming up the driveway, I decided to make a getaway. I scrambled through the hedge and ran into the woods."

"You're sure you didn't leave Raybolt inside on purpose?" Detective Rock asked.

"A thousand times, no!" Mr. Swenson cried out indignantly. "I hated that man, I'll admit, but I didn't plot his death."

"Why didn't you tell your story right away?"

"I was afraid it would be misinterpreted. I had no idea Raybolt was missing until I read it in the newspaper."

The three officials took turns questioning Swenson. They quizzed him about details and time but were unable to confuse him.

Nancy was certain that the inventor's account was true, yet she had to acknowledge that the story sounded somewhat implausible. The fact remained that Felix Raybolt was missing and that Joe Swenson was the last person known to have an appointment with him.

Nevertheless, the inventor's straightforward manner had impressed

the officers, and Nancy thought they were on the verge of letting him go. Felix Raybolt had been generally disliked, and it was common knowledge that he had made his fortune by ruthlessly adopting the ideas of various inventors.

The three officials held a whispered conference, then began questioning Nancy and her friends. The girls told no more than was necessary, with Nancy stressing the story of the inventor's lost letters and the thieving mail clerk. She put in a good word for Mr. Swenson at every opportunity, and it was apparent that she was creating a favorable impression.

The unpleasant session was drawing to a close, with every prospect of vindication for Joe Swenson, when there was a knock at the door.

An officer entered, addressing himself to his superior. "Mrs. Raybolt is here now. Shall I send her in?"

As an affirmative answer was given, Nancy **ex** changed despairing glances with her friends. She sensed that since Mrs. Raybolt had set the detectives on Joe Swenson's trail, the woman would create a scene. "I'm sure she'll do all in her power to damage his case," Nancy thought.

Her premonition was correct. Mrs. Raybolt's very appearance aroused the sympathy of the officials. The woman evidently had worried herself into a state bordering on nervous collapse and the sight of Joe Swenson made her distraught.

"Can you identify him?" the police captain asked.

Mrs. Raybolt stopped sobbing long enough to take her first good look at the prisoner. Nancy, who was watching her closely, saw uncertainty flash over her face. The young detective was convinced the woman had never seen Mr. Swenson before in her life!

Mrs. Raybolt hesitated only an instant, then cried hysterically, "Yes, I'm sure this is the man my husband went to meet—Felix feared him. He is a heartless criminal who deliberately burned my home and plotted my husband's death!"

She burst into tears again and an officer led her from the room. However, the damage had been done. If the three officials had ever seriously considered freeing Swenson, the decision was instantly changed.

"You girls are free to go," the captain told Nancy and her friends. "If we need you again, we'll summon you."

"What about Mr. Swenson?" Nancy inquired hopefully.

“We’ll have to lock him up. Sorry if he’s a friend of yours. His story may be on the level, but he’ll have to prove it.”

There was nothing more to be said. Joe Swenson thanked Nancy for her interest in his case.

“You’re the only real friend I have,” he said unhappily. “I’ve told them the truth, but they won’t believe me.”

“If you only had a witness!” Nancy murmured. “Someone who saw you at the door.”

“No one was around,” Mr. Swenson returned gloomily. “The place was deserted.”

“Don’t give up hope,” Nancy said encouragingly. “I’ll find a lawyer for you. And I’ll bring your wife and Honey to see you, too.”

The conversation was abruptly cut short as an officer took the prisoner by the arm and led him away.

When they entered the outside room, Nancy and her friends found Mrs. Raybolt, slumped on a bench, sobbing. Nancy, provoked that the woman had testified unfairly against Joe Swenson, started to pass her without a word. Then pity surmounted indignation and she paused.

“Don’t grieve about your husband,” Nancy pleaded. “He’ll be found alive—I feel confident of it.”

Mrs. Raybolt wiped her eyes and stood up. She glared at Nancy with an almost insane look in her eyes.

“You dare to tell me that!” she cried out. “You’re an accomplice of Joe Swenson! My husband is gone! You probably helped plot his death!”

Mrs. Raybolt slapped Nancy’s face, then began to shake the girl by her shoulders.

“Captain,” she screamed, “come here! I demand that you arrest this —this accomplice!”

CHAPTER XVI

A New Assignment

SHOCKED by Mrs. Raybolt's angry outburst, Nancy stepped back to dodge the blows.

Bess and George had jumped forward to her defense. But just then a sergeant burst into the room and interceded. Mrs. Raybolt stopped fighting with her fists but not with her tongue.

"I demand the arrest of this girl! She's in league with Joe Swenson and helped to kill my husband!" she screamed.

At this point Captain Johnson appeared. "Mrs. Raybolt," he said sternly, "the law will handle this case. I advise you to calm down or you may find yourself in a hospital under the care of a psychiatrist."

The distraught woman started to reply to this, but apparently thought better of it.

Nancy said calmly, "Mrs. Raybolt, I don't blame you for being upset. But please try to believe that people are trying to help find your husband. The fire investigators are sure no one was in your home at the time of the explosion and fire. Therefore, Mr. Raybolt must be alive."

"Then where is he?" Mrs. Raybolt demanded.

"No one knows." Nancy looked directly at the woman. "Unless you do," she added disarmingly.

Mrs. Raybolt gave a startled quiver. Then she sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands. The others in the room looked at one another. Was the answer going to be yes or no?

Nancy had a strong hunch that it should be yes, but that as soon as

Mrs. Raybolt recovered from the shock of Nancy's unexpected question, she would say no. Finally the woman raised her head. She did not have the look of a grief-stricken widow. Instead, she glared balefully at Nancy.

"This girl is crazy," she said. "Another one of those meddling teenagers. Why doesn't she stay out of other people's business? Of course I haven't heard from Felix. How could I? He's dead! I tell you he's dead!" Mrs. Raybolt's voice had risen to a high pitch.

Captain Johnson asked a sergeant to take Mrs. Raybolt to her car, but requested that the girls remain. After the woman had gone, the officer asked Nancy what had prompted her question.

The girl detective smiled. "I'm sure that many other people think Mr. Raybolt is alive. He has the reputation of having cheated people, including poor Mr. Swenson. Talk is going around that he felt it best to disappear. But wouldn't he get in touch with his wife?"

The police captain looked at Nancy in astonishment. "You are a very clear thinker," he said. "The theory that Mr. Raybolt is alive is being worked on. Hospitals, airlines, railroad companies, steamship companies—all have been questioned. No clues have come up yet."

Nancy thanked the officer for the information, then said, "I hope Mr. Raybolt will be found, and when he is, that he will clear Mr. Swenson of any blame in connection with the fire."

The officer did not reply. Nancy turned to Bess and George. "I think we'd better leave now."

When they reached the sidewalk, George said, "Wow! What a session! Where do we go from here?"

"Home," Bess replied. "What a day this has been!"

"Do you insist?" Nancy asked.

Bess eyed her chum intently. "What's on your mind?"

"I was wondering if Mr. Weston could help us clear Joe Swenson," Nancy replied. "Do you mind driving back to Stanford with me so I can talk to him?"

"Let's do it," Bess urged. "Anything to help dear little Honey's father."

"I agree," said George.

Nancy slid into the driver's seat and took the main street which led toward the highway to Stanford. As the car passed one Mapleton store after another, Bess kept gazing at the window displays. Finally she

asked Nancy to stop.

"I want to run in and buy a new dress for Honey," she said.

"I'll come with you and get her some underwear," George spoke up.

Nancy chuckled. "I'll follow and pick up some shoes for her. First I'll phone Mr. Weston. If he can see us, I'll call home and tell Hannah to notify your families."

The friends alighted and Nancy hastened into a drug store to make the telephone calls. Then she went to a children's shoe store. When she rejoined the cousins back at the car, the girls showed one another their purchases.

"They're lovely," said Nancy. "These things should make Honey very happy. Glad you thought of it, Bess. Mr. Weston will see us, so let's go!"

They reached the impressive Weston home about six-thirty. Both the manufacturer and his wife were amazed to hear of the arrest of Joe Swenson, known as Joe Dahl.

"Even in the short time Dahl has been working for us, he has become a very valuable man in our organization," the plant owner said. "On my desk is a recommendation from the manager for a promotion."

"Then if he's cleared of this charge against him," said Nancy, "you'll take him back?"

"Yes, indeed."

The young sleuth gave Mr. Weston a warm smile in appreciation, then said, "I wonder if you or your factory manager can give us any information that might help to exonerate Mr. Swenson?"

The manufacturer thought for several seconds, then shook his head. He arose, went to the telephone, and called his plant manager. There was a lengthy conversation, then Mr. Weston came back to report:

"I'm afraid we haven't any clues to help you, but my manager feels certain Mr. Dahl—that is, Swenson—would never resort to seeking revenge on an enemy. He is a highly ethical person. I'd be glad to defend him in this way."

"I'll pass the word along," Nancy said. "Thank you so much." She arose to leave.

At once Mrs. Weston insisted that the girls remain to dinner, an invitation which her husband heartily seconded.

"We wouldn't think of your driving back to River Heights without

first having something to eat," he declared.

The girls were persuaded to stay. A four-course dinner was perfectly served by a butler. Mr. and Mrs. Weston were charmingly informal and conversation took on a less serious tone.

Soon after dinner the girls said good-by to the manufacturer and his wife and headed for River Heights. After taking her friends to their homes, Nancy continued to her own residence. She was surprised to see a familiar car standing at the curb.

"Ned must be here!" she thought. "I wonder if he has any news for me?"

She met the young man on the porch as he was leaving the house.

"Nancy, what luck!" he exclaimed with evident pleasure. "I was afraid you weren't coming."

"Any news?" Nancy inquired hopefully.

Ned shook his head regretfully. "I guess I'm not very good as a detective. I haven't been able to learn anything of value. I just drove over thinking you might like to go to a movie with me."

"I've already seen one today," Nancy said. "And I've had all sorts of adventures. So, if you don't mind, I'd rather stay here and talk. I have a lot to tell you."

The suggestion was not displeasing to Ned, for he had mentioned the show merely as an excuse to spend the evening with Nancy.

"You look tired," he said sympathetically. "I shouldn't have come tonight."

"I'm glad you did," Nancy told him quickly. "There's something I particularly want you to do for me."

"At your service!"

Nancy then recounted to the astounded young man all that had happened at Stanford and Mapleton.

"Since you live in Mapleton, it will be easy for you to see Joe Swenson," she concluded. "I wish you'd go to the jail and talk with him—try to cheer him up."

"You bet your life I'll go," Ned assured her promptly. "Anything more I can do?"

"Well, tomorrow you might drive over to Sandy Creek and take some packages to Honey." She indicated the gifts now lying on the hall table. "I'd go myself, only I want to concentrate on finding Mr. Raybolt."

“I’ll be glad to go. I sure feel sorry for those folks. Tell you what! Suppose I take both of them —Mrs. Swenson and Honey—to see Joe. That should cheer him up a little.”

Ned and Nancy discussed the mystery of Felix Raybolt’s strange disappearance, and Ned was of the opinion, too, that Raybolt’s wife might know more than she was telling. It was his conviction that Raybolt had gone into hiding for some nefarious reason.

Seeing that Nancy was very weary, Ned cut his visit shorter than he had intended. When he left her it was with the promise that he would do all in his power to help her locate Felix Raybolt.

Nancy did not retire immediately. She noticed that a light was burning in her father’s study, and she decided to tell him her suspicions. He was buried deep in a lawbook, but he looked up and smiled as his daughter perched herself on the arm of his chair.

“Nancy, you look worried,” he observed. “I hope this new case of yours isn’t getting you down.”

“I’m worried about Joe Swenson,” she explained. “What do you think of his chances, Dad?”

“If the account on tonight’s newcast is correct, I’m of the opinion he’ll be convicted—unless Felix Raybolt shows up.”

“That’s what I want to talk to you about. I’m sure Mr. Raybolt must be hiding somewhere.”

“And I agree,” her father said. “Nancy, I obtained one bit of information today that might prove this. I thought you might track it down for me.”

CHAPTER XVII

An Important Clue

NANCY could hardly wait for her father to proceed. She left the arm of his chair and seated herself on a couch opposite him.

"As you recall," the lawyer began, "I mentioned that Felix Raybolt practically had stolen my client's invention—an improvement for an automatic elevator."

Nancy leaned forward, listening intently as her father continued, "Mr. Simpson also feels that Raybolt may have decided matters were getting too hot for him and he'd better disappear. The other day Mr. Simpson's wife happened to stop at a country store and gas station a few miles outside of Mapleton.

"A run-down old car with a shabby-looking driver was just pulling away. Mrs. Simpson had only a fleeting glimpse of the man, but she thinks he may have been Mr. Raybolt."

"How exciting!" Nancy exclaimed. "Did she follow him?"

"No, but she asked the attendant about him. The man bought a large quantity of canned goods —including bread in tins."

"Which makes it appear," said Nancy, "that the man was going camping."

"Exactly. Of course he may not have been Mr. Raybolt. The clerks in the store said the shabby-looking customer was a stranger to them. But I think the clue is worth investigating."

"Oh, I agree. The man might have been Mr. Raybolt in disguise!" said Nancy eagerly. "I'll get right to it and start by going to that store first thing tomorrow morning."

"But not without Bess and George," Mr. Drew insisted.

Nancy called the cousins at once. Both were enthusiastic about accompanying the girl detective, although Bess as usual said she hoped there would be no danger involved.

"Oh, by the way, Ned was here," Nancy told her. "He's going to deliver our gifts to Honey, then take her and her mother to see Mr. Swenson."

"Good!" Bess giggled. "I see you're starting this friendship with Ned correctly—make your date work for you!" She hung up before Nancy could retort.

The following morning the girls drove to the country store, made a few purchases, then asked if the stranger in the old car had ever come back.

"No, he never did, but he had no reason to," one of the clerks said. "The tank of that old crate was full to the brim, and there was enough food in the back seat to last the guy a month."

"Which way did he go?" Nancy asked.

The man pointed in a direction opposite to the one where the burned Raybolt home was located. After Nancy had received a full description of the old car, she followed the road it had taken.

Presently she said, "Girls, if you were coming along here and planning to hide, where would you go?"

"If I knew about that cobwebby cabin we saw I'd go there," George replied.

"But we were in it *after* Mr. Raybolt's disappearance," Nancy spoke up. "Nobody has been in it for a long time. Bess, what's your guess?"

"Another cabin. One that's closer. Maybe Mr. Raybolt has a small hunting lodge somewhere."

Nancy was driving very slowly now. Finally she said she was looking for a little-used side road. If there were tire tracks on it, she would see where they led.

Suddenly Nancy stopped. On her left was a narrow, grassy lane, almost obscured by overhanging trees. There were two distinct tire tracks.

"You're not going to drive in there?" Bess cried out. "Nancy, you'd ruin your car!"

"I guess you're right," Nancy conceded, "but I think we should investigate."

She parked, locked the ignition, and climbed out. The other girls followed. The woods road was rutty and full of stones.

"I hope we don't have to go far," said Bess presently. "These stones hurt my feet. We should have worn hiking boots."

Nancy forged ahead. The road went on and on, with no sign of a cabin, or the shabby car or its owner. After the girls had walked for fifteen minutes, Bess called for a rest period. They dropped to the ground.

"It's certainly quiet in here," George remarked. "You could hear a pin—oh!"

All three girls were startled by the distant buzz of a chain saw. As they listened, there came a tremendous crash.

"Timber!" exclaimed George, grinning.

"You're a little late with your warning. The tree's already fallen," Bess chided her cousin good-naturedly. "Well, I'm sure Mr. Raybolt isn't doing any lumbering if he's trying to hide, so let's go back."

Nancy felt that they were not a long way from the tree-cutting site. "Whoever is working there may have seen Mr. Raybolt or his old car. Let's find out," she said.

As the girls plodded on over the rough ground, the sounds of trees being felled grew louder. Finally they came to a spot where they could see a good distance ahead. A large area of the woods was being cleared for a housing development. They assumed that the entrance to it was at the far end, for in the distance they could see several new houses.

"There's a man who looks as if he might be the foreman," Nancy said, and walked toward a tall, husky young man. She introduced herself, then asked him if the lane was used by the real-estate developers.

"No, that's on someone else's property," he replied. "My name's Tim Murphy. I'm in charge of the clearing operation. Are you looking for someone?"

"Yes, a shabbily dressed man who has an ancient hot rod." Nancy grinned. "We thought he might be staying in a shack in these woods."

Tim Murphy's reply startled the girls. "I think your friend was here but left mysteriously. This development has been held up, and we just resumed work a couple of days ago. There's a little shack not far from here. It was empty, so whenever we had a downpour, my men and I used it for shelter.

"Two days ago we went there. What a surprise we got! A man came out with a shotgun and ordered us away! He was tall and thin, and his clothes were very shabby."

"Was there a car around?" George asked.

"Yes, a black crate that sure was beat up. Think this is the man you're looking for?"

"Yes," said Bess, "but if he has a shotgun, we're not going near him!"

Tim Murphy laughed. "You needn't worry. He's gone."

This revelation shattered Nancy's hope that her quest was nearing an end. "When did he leave?"

"During the night, and he hasn't come back. I have an idea he won't, either. I got the impression he wanted to be alone, and an expanding housing development is no place for a recluse. Say, do you mind telling me why you girls are interested in such a peculiar guy?"

They were spared the necessity of answering Murphy when a worker called him away. He went off hurriedly, and the girls started back to the lane. They were silent until they came to the spot where they had rested before.

"Do you think the man with the shotgun really was Mr. Raybolt?" George asked Nancy.

The young sleuth shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. One thing is sure. Whoever he was, the man acted as if he were guilty of something and didn't want strangers around."

"Which makes *me* think," said Bess, "that he is Raybolt. Nancy, we must give up trying to find him before he uses that shotgun—on us!"

"I might agree," Nancy replied, "if we were certain. But our evidence is pretty slim. For the sake of the Swensons, I want to capture Mr. Raybolt before he can leave the country. I'm convinced now that he and his wife are in collusion. They're just waiting to collect his life insurance, which is probably large, and the fire insurance, then they'll meet in some foreign place."

George chuckled. "You know, it would serve that old cheat right if his wife collected the money and never met him! He couldn't do a thing about it without being caught."

Bess nodded in agreement. "And I wouldn't put it past that woman to play such a trick!"

When the girls reached the end of the lane, Bess announced that she

thought they should have lunch before doing any more sleuthing.

"All right," Nancy agreed. Laughing, she added, "How about the Mapleton Inn?"

"And have Mrs. Raybolt bring the police to arrest you!" Bess protested with a giggle.

Nancy had noticed an attractive roadside restaurant on the outskirts of town and drove to it. As the girls ate, they discussed their next move.

"I'd like to call on Mr. Swenson," said Nancy, "and ask him if there's anything else in the diary that might be damaging evidence against Mr. Raybolt."

It was three o'clock before the girls arrived at headquarters. When Nancy made her request to the sergeant in charge of prisoners, she was told that Mr. Swenson had just been brought to one of the waiting rooms.

"His kid came to see him," the officer explained, "and we didn't want her to see him behind bars. We told Honey that her dad had to stay with us a while. His wife's there too. Are you special friends of theirs?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then." The sergeant called another officer, who took the girls into the waiting room. A policeman stood watching.

At once Honey bounded into Nancy's arms. "See, I have on all my new clothes!" she said proudly.

Mr. and Mrs. Swenson seemed very glad to see the visitors. The couple smiled pathetically and it was evident that Mrs. Swenson had spent a good deal of time crying. Her eyes were swollen and red. She looked pale and weary, as though she had slept little.

"Your kind friend Ned Nickerson brought Honey and me here. He will come back for us in an hour."

Joe Swenson looked haggard and worried. He brightened somewhat when Nancy told him that Baylor Weston was not only keeping his position at the factory for him, but that a promotion awaited the inventor.

"You're the only one who can help us," Mrs. Swenson said tearfully to Nancy. "We haven't enough money to engage a lawyer, and we have no well-to-do friends."

"If the case actually comes to trial, I know my father will defend Mr.

Swenson without a fee," Nancy assured her. "However, I'm hopeful that we'll prove your husband's innocence before that time."

"The book you have may help," Mr. Swenson said guardedly.

Nancy nodded. She knew he meant the diary. It was still in her purse. She told herself, "I'll have the rest of it translated at once."

The girls remained a few minutes longer, then departed, realizing that the little family wished to be alone. When they reached the street, Nancy told her friends, "If Mr. Peterson's well enough, I'm going to see if he will read the diary. Let's go to a phone and find out."

CHAPTER XVIII

A Revealing Translation

THERE was an outdoor telephone booth at the entrance to a parking lot next to police headquarters. Nancy entered it and dialed the number of the Peterson bakery. To her delight, she learned that her old friend was home from the hospital and would be glad to see her.

When George heard this she said, “You’re running a shuttle service between River Heights and Mapleton.”

Bess giggled. “With side trips to Stanford and Sandy Creek.”

“Don’t plan on staying home long,” Nancy warned them. “I may need you tonight.”

“Tonight!” Bess exclaimed. “I was counting on giving myself a shampoo and—”

“Whatever it is,” George interrupted, “the Swenson-Raybolt mystery is more important. Well, I’ll stick by you, Nancy.”

“And I will, of course,” Bess declared. “But please get this mystery solved soon, so I can catch up on a few things.”

“Like what?” George asked.

“Well, I’ve postponed a nice date three times already,” Bess said. “I was to go out with Jeff Allen tonight, but I’ll put it off again. Nancy, where will we be going?”

Nancy said this would depend on what she learned from the diary.

When the girls reached River Heights, Nancy dropped off Bess and George at their homes, then drove to the Peterson bakery. She learned from the counter clerk that the owner was upstairs in his apartment, and the woman showed Nancy the stairway to the second floor.

The elderly convalescent was seated in an armchair and apologized for not rising to greet Nancy. She smiled, saying, “Mr. Peterson, it’s wonderful to see you again, and how glad I am you’re feeling better.”

“Thank you, Nancy. Why, you’re a young lady now!” He laughed. “I remember you as a little girl, always objecting to the ribbons Mrs. Gruen put in your hair. You especially liked my Swedish fruit tarts.”

“Mm,” said Nancy, smiling in recollection. “I can almost taste the lingonberry ones now. They were my favorite. Well, Mr. Peterson, I’ve come to ask a favor of you. Would you translate a Swedish diary for me?”

“It would give me great pleasure. I am very much interested in diaries. Many secrets of history have been unraveled by diaries that were uncovered some time after the writers’ deaths.”

“I never realized that,” said Nancy.

“In many cases this is true of the personal journals the famous people kept,” the baker explained. “Take Queen Victoria of England, for instance. Pictures of her and the complicated politics she was forced to play make her seem like a very stern old lady. But she left a diary telling of her life as a young queen and mother of small children that gives a very different idea of her. She was gay—loved to dance and give very elegant parties.”

“How interesting!”

“Then of course there were other diaries set down by great men of history; for example, George Washington’s well-kept account of his life. One section tells of a journey from Washington to Philadelphia which took five days! He also told of a gift of mules to him from General Lafayette for his farm.

“One of the most important diaries was that of Christopher Columbus, who kept a record of his entire journey from Palos in Spain to our continent. Did you know, Nancy, that when he saw the shores of Cuba he thought it was Japan?”

Nancy laughed. “I guess the old mariners made some amazing mistakes.”

“What is more amazing is how they managed to get back home,” said Mr. Peterson. “Some of the voyages must have seemed endless. I enjoyed reading about a schoolmaster who took a job as a private tutor with a family that was moving from Scotland to Virginia. It was a three-month voyage and all he received for tutoring the children was ‘bed, board, washing, and five pounds’ for the entire time!”

“How things have changed!” Nancy remarked.

She had listened in rapt attention to his recital of items in the old journals. Nancy wondered if Joe Swenson's up-to-date diary would prove to be as revealing about the writer's inner thoughts. A tingle of excitement came over her as she took the diary from her purse and handed it to Mr. Peterson.

The baker glanced through it before starting to read aloud. "The writer of this journal is an inventor, I see," he commented. "It's not a day-by-day account. Apparently he put down only the most important events."

Mr. Peterson began to translate. Much of what had been written was delightful and informative, but had no bearing on the Raybolt case.

After a while Nancy interrupted to say, "If you're becoming tired, please stop. I'll come back another time."

"Don't you worry, Nancy. I feel fine."

He read on. "'Today,' " the diarist had written, "'I went to see a man who sells inventions to big companies and shares the royalties with the inventors. His name is Raybolt. Tomorrow I shall take him my drawings and typed instructions for the electrochemical process and machine which will put a special ceramic finish on steel to resist high temperatures.' "

Mr. Peterson turned the page and translated a description of the meeting, during which Mr. Swenson had handed over everything to Felix Raybolt. He had been given a check for five hundred dollars and the verbal promise of a fifty-fifty royalty split in the future.

"'Mr. Raybolt,' " Mr. Peterson translated, "'is a very shrewd man. He confided to me that he didn't keep all his important papers and money in bank safe-deposit boxes. He has a secret hiding place in his house known to no one but himself. The—' "

"Just a minute!" Nancy cried out. "Please translate that part again about the secret hiding place!" To herself she added, "Maybe that's what Mr. Swenson meant when he said 'The book you have may help.' "

Mr. Peterson complied with Nancy's request, then looked up and smiled. "You see a mystery here?"

"Indeed I do. And one that ought to be solved. Did you know that Mr. Raybolt's house burned to the ground and he has disappeared?"

"I had not heard," the baker replied. "But then I do not know this Felix Raybolt. Shall I read further?"

"Oh, please do."

Mr. Peterson went on. There were many references to the invention with some technical language about how the machine and the chemicals worked to produce the desired finish on metals.

"This is proof without a doubt that the invention is Mr. Swenson's," Nancy thought excitedly.

She listened carefully. The diary came to an end without any mention of a contract between the two men. Nancy was elated. Joe Swenson had a good case against Felix Raybolt! She was eager to talk over the whole matter with her father.

"Mr. Peterson," she said, taking the diary, "you've been a tremendous help in this mixed-up mystery. Thank you very much."

"I am glad to have been of assistance," the baker replied. "The reading was most enjoyable. This writer of the diary is well educated and clever." Mr. Peterson smiled. "But he does not sound like a very good businessman. I presume that is why he is in some kind of trouble."

"That's exactly it," Nancy answered.

“Please translate that part again about the secret hiding place!” Nancy asked

“And you will get him out of the trouble,” the baker said. He

chuckled. “I just can’t believe the little girl who loved cookies is now a detective!”

Nancy laughed, shook Mr. Peterson’s hand fervently, and took her departure.

Wishing to see her father at once, she went directly to his office. Mr. Drew was about to leave, to be gone until later that evening.

“I can see you for about five minutes, Nancy,” the lawyer said.

His daughter told Mr. Drew as quickly as possible what she had learned, and he agreed that the inventor had a good chance of winning his case—if Mr. Raybolt could be found.

“So far the police haven’t a clue to his whereabouts, Nancy. I believe you came nearer to capturing him than anyone else has. It’s too bad he moved out of that cabin.”

“And worse that he has disappeared into thin air,” Nancy replied. “But I’m not giving up!”

“That’s the spirit,” her father said affectionately. “Well, best of luck! And when you see Mr. Swenson, tell him not to worry.”

Nancy drove home slowly as she tried to figure out the puzzle. When she reached the house, Hannah Gruen was taking a few minutes’ rest and sipping a cup of tea. Nancy joined her and told of the most recent happenings.

“My goodness,” said the housekeeper, “you’ve done several days’ work in one! Now you must relax.”

Nancy hardly touched her own cup of tea. She sat staring into space, and understanding Mrs. Gruen did not interrupt the young sleuth’s train of thought.

Suddenly Nancy cried, “I’ve just figured it out!”

“Figured what out?”

“How to trap Felix Raybolt!”

CHAPTER XIX

Setting a Trap

NANCY told Hannah Gruen her plan. She believed that Felix Raybolt was hiding somewhere near the ruined estate, perhaps in the dense woods which adjoined the property, and she proposed to watch the place for a return visit.

"It's said that a criminal always returns to the scene of his crime," she declared. "And he has a special reason, besides—to get something out of the secret hiding place. Up till now, I understand, police guards have been stationed on the grounds day and night. The special investigators from out of town expected to finish their examination of the ruins today, and the guards would no longer be necessary."

"What do you plan to do?" Mrs. Gruen asked.

"Bess and George and I will watch for him tonight. We may waste our time, but I have a feeling—I can't explain it—that we'll catch him near the burned house."

"It sounds risky, Nancy. How about taking a man with you?"

"Dad won't be home to supper. He'll be out for the evening." After a pause Nancy added, "Maybe I can get Ned Nickerson."

"Please do that."

Nancy telephoned Ned's house but there was no answer. "I'll stop there when I get to Mapleton," she told Hannah.

When George received Nancy's call, she was intrigued to hear about the secret hiding place where Mr. Raybolt kept valuable papers.

"Where do you suppose it is—or was?" George asked.

"If it's still intact," Nancy replied, "there's only one spot for a hiding

place—behind the stones of the cellar wall. Even if Mr. Raybolt doesn't show up, I'd like to try to find it. So come dressed for some digging!"

Nancy made the same request of Bess and added that she would pick her up in forty-five minutes.

"Fine," said Bess. "That'll give me time to eat and get dressed. I'll be ready."

Finally the girls were on their way to Mapleton.

"It's going to be pretty dark tonight," Bess commented. "There'll be no moon."

"So much the better," Nancy declared. "Mr. Raybolt probably wouldn't venture to return if he thought there would be any danger of his being detected."

"Your plan sounds dangerous to me," Bess remarked. "What if Mr. Raybolt should come and make trouble?"

"We'd be three to one," Nancy returned. "Of course it would be better if we had a man along. I'm going to stop at Ned's house and see if he can come with us."

"Good!"

The sun was sinking low when Nancy swung into Mapleton. The girls stopped at the Nickerson residence which was on their route, but were disappointed to learn that Ned had not returned home after driving Mrs. Swenson and Honey to Sandy Creek.

"Who knows—maybe he's off hunting for Foxy Felix," Nancy said to her friends. "I'll leave a note for him, and if he should get back in time, he might follow us to the estate."

She quickly wrote a message and gave it to Ned's mother. Mrs. Nickerson promised to deliver it the moment her son came home.

As they drove away from the Nickerson home, Bess said nervously, "I have a feeling something dreadful is going to happen tonight. It wouldn't be so bad if there only were other houses close by, but they're so far away, the neighbors wouldn't hear us even if we screamed for help."

"Calm down," Nancy advised. "Three strong, capable girls like ourselves shouldn't need any help."

"I'd be a match for Foxy Felix myself," George boasted. "Look at *my* arm muscles. I assure you I haven't wasted all the time I spent in the gym."

Dusk was just settling when the girls came within sight of the burned mansion. The Raybolt estate looked unpleasantly lonely. Even George felt less inclined to joke as she realized that within a few moments it would be dark.

Nancy drove past the estate and hid the convertible in a dense clump of trees.

"We'll leave the car here," she said, "and go quietly up the driveway."

The girls armed themselves with flashlights, a pick, and two lightweight shovels. Then they went cautiously along the road and turned into the estate. No one came to challenge them as they reached the ruined house. A few charred beams which had not fallen to the ground stood like sentinels guarding the wreckage. In the dimness the girls could easily imagine that they were ghostly figures.

"This is going to be spookier than I figured," Bess chattered nervously. "Nancy, you do have the wildest ideas."

The girl detective did not reply to this. When she was fairly certain no one else was around, she turned on her flashlight and played it on the stone walls of the house's foundation. Nancy realized it would be a herculean task to move the debris away to inspect them. Nevertheless, she set the light on a pile of rubble and began to shovel away a heap of plaster.

"What do you expect to find?" George asked, turning on her flashlight and setting it down. "And tell me how I can help."

"A safe," Nancy answered. "And how about you girls taking turns with the pick and shovel? The other one act as lookout."

Bess posted herself as guard while the others worked. Nancy and George uncovered several feet of wall but found no loose stones or anything indicating a section to open. The stones were tightly cemented.

Suddenly Bess whispered hoarsely, "Put out the lights! I hear someone coming!"

The flashes were clicked off and the three girls crouched down. They could hear nothing now.

"I'm sure I wasn't mistaken," Bess said.

"I believe we had better quit this work and hide," said Nancy. "If Mr. Raybolt is coming, he'll probably be here soon."

"Maybe he's the person I heard," Bess whispered.

“All the more reason for us to pretend to be leaving in case he’s watching us,” George spoke up.

The girls left the ruins without turning on their lights, stumbling and falling over the debris. They went down the driveway, but before reaching the end, Nancy said, “Let’s leave the tools here, go into the woods, and sneak back toward the ruins.”

They hid the pick and shovels and retraced their steps. Nancy found a place behind a clump of bushes only a short distance from the ruins. The shrubs concealed the girls, yet disclosed a view of the driveway and the woods. Nancy and her friends settled themselves as comfortably as possible. But from the first, insects made it plain that they resented the intrusion.

A half hour passed, then an hour. The girls were startled several times as twigs crackled or dead limbs of trees crashed in the breeze.

“The bugs have nearly eaten me up,” Bess complained, “and my back feels as though it were broken.”

“You’ll become paralyzed after another hour or so.” Nancy grinned.

“How long do you propose staying here?” George demanded. “It must be almost midnight now.”

“It isn’t ten o’clock yet.” Nancy laughed.

“Well, I don’t think Mr. Raybolt is coming or he’d have been here by this time,” Bess said sleepily. “Why don’t we go home?”

“I want to stay a while longer,” Nancy returned quietly.

Again the girls became silent. Bess and George, having accustomed themselves to their hiding place, stretched out and left Nancy to keep watch. They were no longer nervous or afraid—only weary of an adventure which had gone stale.

Presently George became very quiet and then fell asleep. Bess’s eyes closed, too, and soon she was in a deep sleep.

How long the cousins slept, they had no idea. But suddenly they were awakened by a scream, and the sound of running feet on the driveway.

“Nancy!” cried George, jumping up. “What has happened?”

There was no answer.

“Nancy!” called Bess, grabbing George by the arm.

Still there was no answer, and the two girls realized that their friend was no longer with them. Where was she? Who had screamed? Who was coming up the road in such haste?

CHAPTER XX

A Surprising Victory

WHILE the cousins had been asleep, Nancy had taken matters into her own hands. Her mind had been too active for her to feel sleepy. As she watched, first the woods, then the driveway, then the burned house, she suddenly became aware of footsteps.

"Maybe that's Ned," she thought hopefully.

The masculine figure was still too far away for Nancy to be able to discern who it could be. While she waited with bated breath, the man paused. She was about to awaken Bess and George when it occurred to her that they might speak aloud and warn the oncoming figure of their presence.

As the man turned toward the burned house, Nancy was in a quandary. She did not dare rouse her friends, yet she wanted to follow the intruder. She must find out who he was—Ned, come to help her, an inquisitive neighbor, or Felix Raybolt.

Leaving her friends, Nancy began to follow the man. Stealthily she crept nearer the ruins, dodging from tree to tree. She was glad there was no moon, for the darkness afforded protection.

When she was only a few feet away from the man, Nancy paused. He turned on a flashlight. This was not Ned Nickerson. From descriptions of the estate owner and from numerous newspaper photographs of him, Nancy felt certain that the tall, thin figure must be Felix Raybolt! He was carrying a shovel.

Suddenly he scrambled over the rubble and began to dig vigorously in the cellar wall some distance from where Nancy had been working.

"So that's where the secret hiding place is," thought the young

detective.

She watched excitedly as Mr. Raybolt uncovered a group of stones in the foundation wall. He removed them, opened the door of a safe beyond, and pulled out a stack of papers. To Nancy's horror, he laid them down and set a match to the sheaf.

"It's evidence against him!" Nancy said to herself. "He can't destroy it!"

Instantly Nancy sprang forward. She grabbed the shovel and beat out the flames. At the same time she cried, "Mr. Felix Raybolt, you can't burn those papers!"

The man had started violently and staggered backward. Nancy caught him by the arm, saying, "Why have you been hiding?"

Almost at once, Mr. Raybolt recovered from the shock of the unexpected encounter, and jerked himself free. For an instant he looked at Nancy in blank amazement.

"A snooper, eh?" he sneered.

Without warning he grabbed both his flashlight and her own. He turned and started to run across the grounds. "Get out of my way! Mind your own business!" he warned.

Nancy darted after him, but he definitely had the advantage of being familiar with the area. Her only chance to capture him lay in the possibility of his turning toward the place where she had left Bess and George. She must arouse them. Nancy did not know what Raybolt might do if she made an outcry, but she had to take that chance.

"Help! Help!" she screamed.

Bess and George, having heard the shrill cries for help, and approaching footsteps, were now convinced Nancy had uttered the cries and that she was in danger.

"Oh, what shall we do?" asked Bess. "The screams seemed to come from near the ruins."

"*Sh!*" George warned. "Those footsteps coming up the driveway! Maybe it's someone who can help us!"

This remark electrified Bess, who turned on her flash and rushed frantically ahead. She was the first to reach two men running up the driveway.

"Mr. Drew! Ned Nickerson!" the cousins cried in relief.

"Where's Nancy?" the men asked together.

"We don't know," Bess gasped. "We heard her scream—over by the

ruins."

The men dashed past the girls, Ned in the lead. Bess and George started after them.

"Help! Help!" came Nancy's scream again, but this time it was nearer.

Suddenly a man's figure burst from a clump of shrubs at the bend in the driveway. He saw the approaching group too late to stop. He could not turn, for Nancy appeared directly behind him. He veered off to the lawn.

"Hold on there!" Mr. Drew commanded sharply.

"Dad!" Nancy cried out, and an instant later she recognized the second figure. "Ned!"

Felix Raybolt was easily captured. The appearance of the two men convinced the estate owner that his game was up, and he made little protest as they led him to Carson Drew's sedan.

"Nancy, you girls had better come with us," Mr. Drew suggested. "You can return and pick up your car later." They agreed readily.

"Where are you taking me?" Raybolt muttered, as he got into the sedan.

"To jail," Mr. Drew told him tersely.

"To jail?" the prisoner shrieked. "I haven't done anything!"

"Maybe not, but an innocent man is being held there in connection with your disappearance. You *must* exonerate Joe Swenson at once from having had anything to do with your absence or with the fire."

"Swenson?" echoed the captured man. "He—"

Raybolt broke off and slumped down in the seat. He looked sick and beaten. His face was grimy and unshaven, and his clothing torn and stained.

"How in the world did you and Dad get here at the psychological moment?" Nancy asked Ned.

"Well—I'd been gone from home since morning," Ned explained. "This evening I drove to River Heights to see you. Mrs. Gruen told me you had gone to Mapleton and said she thought I was with you. I telephoned Mother from your house and she gave me your message."

Mr. Drew added, "I returned home just as Ned was leaving. When I heard what you were doing I decided I'd better come along."

At the jail Foxy Felix did not even appear to be flustered about the

situation. When questioned by the officials, he admitted that he had had an appointment with Joe Swenson but said that he had been outside the house at the time of the explosion.

"Isn't it true that you had explosives illegally stored in your cellar?" Nancy asked him.

Raybolt nodded. He claimed the explosion and fire had been accidental. When asked about his disappearance, he gave an evasive explanation. He said that he had been stunned at first, then had staggered off into the woods.

"And vanished," said Carson Drew. "You carry heavy life and fire insurance, I presume, Mr. Raybolt. Your wife could have collected the money, and met you later in some faraway place."

The telltale flush on Raybolt's face told the lawyer that Nancy's and his supposition had probably hit its mark, but Raybolt confessed nothing. They judged that Mapleton *had* become too unfriendly a place for Foxy Felix. His enemies were numerous, and he no doubt lived in constant fear of physical harm. The fire had given him an opportunity to slip away quietly.

"Guess we can't hold him," the captain told the Drews. "This clears Swenson beyond a doubt. Sorry we arrested him, Miss Drew, but you must admit the evidence pointed his way."

Joe Swenson was brought into the room. He was overjoyed about being freed, and at first could scarcely believe the good news. Tears came to his eyes as he thanked Nancy and her friends for all they had done.

"It's a shame that Felix Raybolt can't be held," Nancy said. "Isn't there *any* charge to keep him here?"

"I'm afraid not," her father returned. "Everyone knows the man has swindled people, including my client, but we have no proof. We need papers, letters—"

Suddenly Nancy grabbed her father's arm. "I may be able to produce them!" she said excitedly, and told about the papers which Raybolt had tried to burn but she had managed to save.

"Excellent," said Mr. Drew, as Bess, George, and Ned gasped in astonishment. "We'll go out there at once with an officer if Captain Johnson agrees."

The captain called a lieutenant and said that the man would accompany them to the burned estate. Mr. Raybolt, he added, would have to remain at headquarters to await the arrival of the papers.

The others hurried outside and drove off in a squad car. When they reached the ruins, Nancy pointed out the exact location of the safe. The police lieutenant quickly gathered up the records that Raybolt had started to burn, also some papers which the officer found in the safe. When the Drews and their friends reached headquarters, they were amazed to find that Mrs. Raybolt had arrived. She was admonishing her husband not to admit anything.

Captain Johnson handed the papers to Mr. Drew. “Please look at these,” he requested. “If they have any bearing on this case—”

Felix Raybolt jumped from his chair. “Don’t read them! I admit I paid small sums to inventors and promised royalties I never sent, though I sold their ideas for large amounts. I’ll give restitution to every one of them!”

“Felix! Felix!” his wife screamed. “Don’t give in!” She glared at Nancy. “Oh—look at all the trouble you’ve caused!”

Raybolt appeared not to hear her. “I’ll pay everyone even if it takes my last cent! I’ll do anything if only you won’t send me to prison!”

“Don’t do it! Don’t do it!” Mrs. Raybolt pleaded. ‘We’ll be ruined!”

“We’ll be ruined if I don’t,” her husband muttered, “because I’ll have to go to jail.”

Mrs. Raybolt sank into a chair, covered her face with her hands, and began to sob. For an instant Nancy felt sorry for her, then changed her mind, as the woman burst out:

“We had the whole thing so well planned. No loopholes. Then this Nancy Drew has to come along and spoil our lives.”

Nancy, her father, their friends, and the police captain looked at Mrs. Raybolt in astonishment. The officer leaned forward and asked, “Are you admitting that you and your husband planned this whole unscrupulous plot?”

“Keep quiet!” Raybolt stormed.

But the damage had been done. Little by little a full confession was obtained from the husband and wife about the plot they had devised to pile up a fortune from insurance, then vanish.

Raybolt finally admitted that he had rigged up a television set on the first floor to trigger the explosion by remote control. He had planned that it would go off when Joe Swenson arrived for the appointment.

“But Swenson was twenty minutes early,” Mr. Raybolt growled, “so I had to go ahead and cause the explosion without getting the papers

out of the safe. I knew I could come back later for them."

Further questioning proved that Mrs. Raybolt was responsible for having the two detectives track down the inventor and put the blame on him.

At the end of the session, everyone in the room showed complete disgust for the Raybolts.

"All their conniving at the expense of other people," Nancy thought.

Both the Raybolts were held. They were allowed to telephone for legal counsel, but even before the lawyer arrived, the husband asked for a checkbook from Mrs. Raybolt's purse and wrote out a check for several thousand dollars to the order of Joe Swenson.

"If you'll look among those papers Nancy Drew saved," the estate owner said, "you'll find one that's a receipt for the sale of his invention to the Streeter Corporation."

Mr. Drew looked at the receipt and commented that the amount of the check was five hundred dollars less than the sum on the receipt.

"I received five hundred from Mr. Raybolt in cash," Joe Swenson spoke up. Then, without smiling, he added, "Thank you, Mr. Raybolt, for this check."

Mr. Drew, meanwhile, had continued looking through the papers Nancy had rescued. He frowned angrily, but said nothing until he came to a bulging envelope which he opened.

"These are the plans stolen from my client, Mr. Simpson," he remarked. "I will take them, Mr. Raybolt. And, Captain Johnson, I think you had better keep the rest of these papers to see that the other inventors are properly reimbursed."

"I'll certainly see that they are," the officer declared.

All the visitors but the Raybolts left headquarters. Ned offered to take the still-stunned Joe Swenson home in order to break the good news to his wife. Honey, of course, would be asleep.

"Suppose you come to dinner at our house tomorrow for a victory celebration, all of you," Nancy invited. "Ned, could you—"

"Yes, I'll gladly drive the Swensons over," he said.

Bess chortled, "We wouldn't miss it for the world!" and George nodded vigorously.

The following day was an exceedingly happy one at the Drew home. The Swensons wore broad grins, and Honey's mother said, "We owe all our happiness to you, Nancy."

“I think you owe it to the fact that your husband dropped the diary,” Nancy said, smiling.

“Yes,” said George. “If it hadn’t been for the clue Nancy found in it, she never could have located the owner and helped bring you all together.”

As the gala dinner ended, Mr. Swenson mentioned that Baylor Weston was promoting him to a responsible position in the experimental division of the factory at a large salary.

“That’s marvelous,” said Nancy.

“You have been so kind to us,” Mrs. Swenson spoke up, “that we want to show our appreciation in a more material way.”

She presented each of the girls with a tissue-wrapped package. “It isn’t much,” she said apologetically.

“Indeed it is!” Nancy cried, unwrapping a beautiful purse.

As she opened it, the girl detective found a note inside. The message read: “Will you please keep my signet ring to remind you of your adventure and of our deep gratitude for all you have done for us. Joe Swenson.”

“I’d love to, of course,” Nancy said, a little catch in her throat. “The ring has meant a great deal to you. Now it will to me.”

Bess and George likewise received purses and Ned a wallet. They thanked the donors heartily. A short time later the inventor and his family left, after promising to call frequently on Nancy and her father.

The young detective felt a glow of pleasure as always when she made lasting friends of people she had helped. But she did not know in what strange way this would occur soon again. Much to her amazement, in her next adventure, *Nancy’s Mysterious Letter,* she was to help someone with a name like her own who was in great trouble.

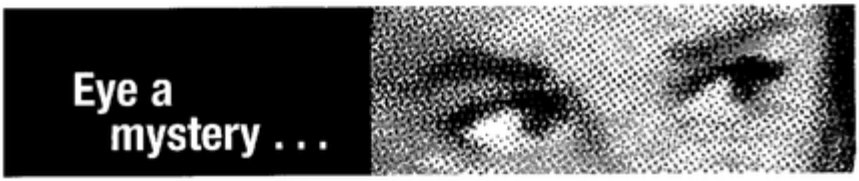
“It really was a gorgeous party!” Bess sighed blissfully. “Such fun!”

“Say,” said Ned, “I have a notion to start a diary of my own!”

“Why don’t you?” Nancy asked lightly.

She became conscious that Ned’s eyes were looking straight at her. “I will if I can fill most of the pages with entries of dates with you.”

Nancy evaded the question. “I enjoyed your help in solving the Swenson mystery. Maybe we’ll soon find another one we can work on together.”



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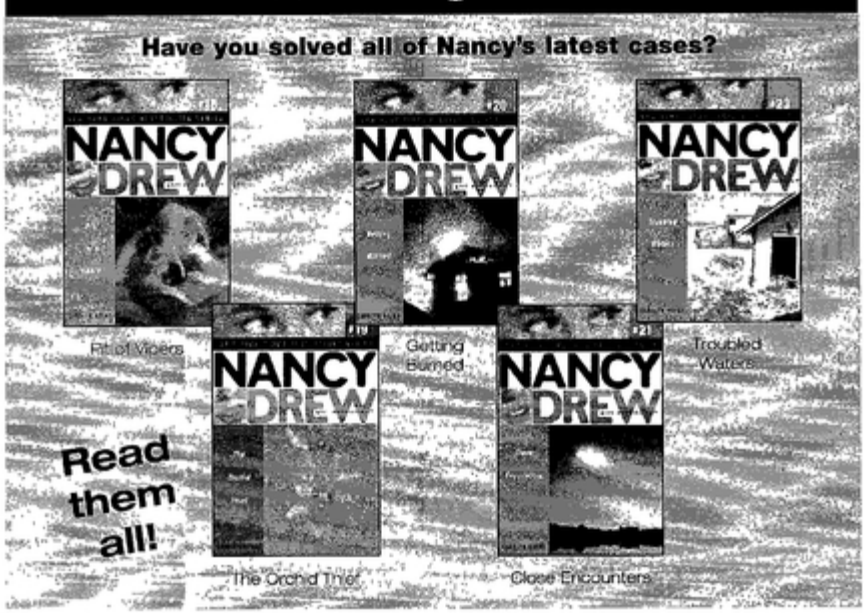

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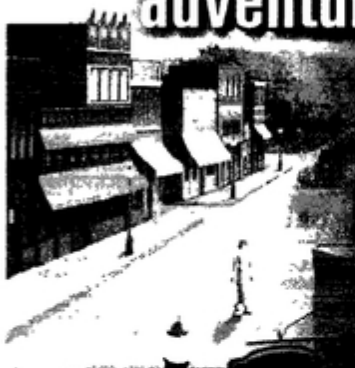

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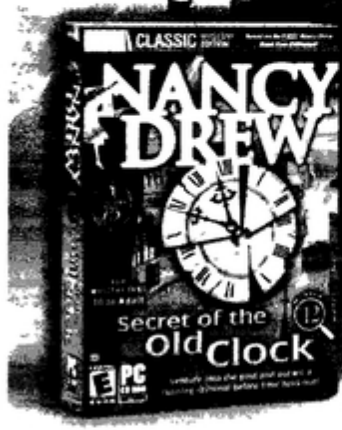

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Ned pulled Nancy down to the pavement

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CHAPTER I

Stolen Letters

"OH, poor Ira!" Nancy Drew exclaimed and slowed her convertible.

The two girls with her turned to look toward the sidewalk. Trudging along was an elderly mail carrier. He was lugging a heavy bag over one shoulder. His head was down and his eyes were almost closed against the strong November wind that swirled leaves and dirt around him.

"Mr. Nixon!" Nancy called out of her open window. "Let me give you a ride."

The mail carrier looked up and managed a smile. "Hello, Nancy," he said. "Thank you, but I have to stop at every house. Lots of letters today. There's one in the bottom of my bag for you. It was sent air mail from London, England."

"How exciting!" Nancy said. "Well, I'll see you at the house." She added, "I'll have some hot cocoa waiting for you."

Mr. Nixon smiled and Nancy drove on.

"I don't know anyone in London," she said to her friends. "Who could be writing to me?"

The attractive, titian-blond, blue-eyed girl at once became lost in thought.

"Another mystery probably," remarked her dark-haired companion, George Fayne. George was an attractive, slender girl, who kept her hair short and always wore tailored clothes.

Her cousin, seated next to her, was blond and slightly overweight. When Bess Marvin grinned, her deep dimples showed prominently. "Maybe you have an unknown admirer in England, Nancy," she said.

George gave Bess a dark look. "Do you always have to think of the romantic side of things?"

Bess tossed her head. "What's more fun?" she retorted.

The three girls were returning from an overnight visit to Red Gate Farm, where at one time Nancy, with the help of her two friends, had captured a counterfeiting gang. The solving of that mystery had been followed by Nancy's tracking down *The Clue in the Diary*.

The trunk of Nancy's convertible was filled with fruits and vegetables from the farm. When she reached the rear of her home, the Drews' housekeeper, Mrs. Hannah Gruen, opened the door and rushed down the steps.

"Nancy, you're home!" she cried out, and gave the girl a hug. "Hello, Bess. Hello, George."

As Nancy unlocked the trunk of her car, she said, "We met Ira Nixon down the street. He's bringing another mystery!" She told the housekeeper about the letter from England. "Poor Ira is half-frozen. I promised him some hot cocoa When he gets here."

"I'll go right in and make it," said Mrs. Gruen. "You girls unload the car. My, what a lot of stuff and it smells wonderful!"

Nancy and her friends had just finished putting the farm products into the Drews' cold cellar when the front doorbell rang. Nancy hastened to answer it.

Mr. Nixon stood there. As he set his mailbag down in the vestibule, Nancy thought, "He looks so exhausted, I hope he can finish out the year until his January retirement."

She led the way into the living room. Nancy, although eager to see her mail, resisted the temptation to ask for it. She would wait until he was ready to give it to her.

A few moments later Bess came In carrying a tray with four cups of cocoa. Behind her was George with a big plate of homemade cookies. Hannah Gruen, who had lived with Nancy and her father since the death of the girl's mother when she was three years old, was an excellent cook. She enjoyed baking and often surprised the family with delicious cakes and pies.

Ira Nixon sipped his cocoa slowly. He nibbled on a cookie and slowly color came into his thin face. Hannah Gruen walked in with a pot of cocoa and refilled everyone's cup. As the mail carrier finished the second cup of cocoa, he said he must be on his way.

"I almost forgot to give you your letter," Mr. Nixon said as he stood up, and went directly to the vestibule.

A moment later the girls heard him cry out and rushed to his side.

"What's the matter?" Nancy asked.

“The letters! They’re gone!”

“What do you mean?” George asked, peering into the bag. There was nothing in it but magazines.

“All the letters still to be delivered have been stolen!” Ira Nixon exclaimed.

He began to sway and the girls quickly grabbed hold of him. They led him back to the living-room sofa.

“Oh dear! Oh dear!” he moaned. “Only six weeks more to my retirement and now this disgrace!”

Bess tried to soothe him. “But it wasn’t your fault.”

“It’s a rule that a mail carrier must keep his bag with him at all times,” the man said.

"All the letters have been stolen!" the mailman exclaimed

Suddenly George turned to Nancy. "Your letter from England! Now you'll never know who sent it."

“And that’s not the worst of it,” Ira Nixon spoke up. “I also had a registered letter for Mr. Drew. There may have been an important document in it.”

The girls and Hannah Gruen looked at one another. Almost instantly, Nancy sprang into action.

“The thief can’t be far away,” she said. “We must try to catch him!”

The three girls put on their coats and dashed out the front door. The Drew home stood well back from the street and was reached by a curving driveway.

“You girls go left,” Nancy suggested. “I’ll go to the right.”

They ran to the street and looked in all directions. Bess and George, seeing no one, hurried to the corner. Then George went left and Bess right.

In the meantime Nancy had spotted little Tommy Johnson, who was riding his tricycle on the sidewalk. She hurried to talk to him.

“Hi, Nancy!” he called out. “I just made a new record. Want to see how fast I can go?”

“Some other time, Tommy,” she answered. “Tell me, have you been riding past our house?”

“Sure thing.”

“Did you see anybody come from there in the past few minutes?” Nancy asked the five-year-old.

“Yep. A man.”

“What did he look like?”

Tommy thought for a moment. “Well, he—he was real thin and he was taller than you and he was in an awful hurry.”

“What was he wearing?” Nancy prodded.

Tommy giggled. “A yellow coat and hat.”

Nancy was puzzled. “You mean a yellow raincoat and rain hat?”

“Nope. It was a winter coat and hat like my daddy wears.”

“And it was yellow?” Nancy asked.

Tommy nodded. Then he grinned. “Nancy, While I was racin’ I was playin’ ’tective like you. I can tell you something else.”

Nancy stooped down so that she was on eye level with Tommy. “Tell me everything,” she pleaded.

“Will you give me a ’tective’s badge if I do?” he asked.

“I sure will,” Nancy promised. “Now tell me quickly what else you can about the man in the yellow coat.”

“I can’t tell you anything else about him, but I know something about his car.”

“Oh, he was in a car?”

“He sure was,” Tommy replied, and began to laugh. “It was a beat-up old thing. I guess he’s pretty poor.”

“What color was the car?” Nancy asked.

“Same as his coat.” Tommy paused and then said, his eyes twinkling, “You know what? I remember some of his license plate. The first part was TJ just like my name.”

Nancy asked excitedly, “Do you remember the number?”

“Not all of it. It was too long. But the first two numbers were 1-2.”

“Oh, Tommy, you’ve been a wonderful help to me,” Nancy said, giving the little boy a hug. “One more question. Did you see the man carrying anything in his hand?”

“Yep. He had a lot of letters and he was stuffin’ ’em into his pockets.”

Nancy realized that the suspect by this time was too far away for her to find. But she was excited by the excellent clues the little boy had given her. She thanked him and returned home.

At the front door she met Bess and George. Her friends reported they had had no luck. Nancy told them what she had learned. As soon as they entered the house, she hurried to the living room. Ira Nixon sat slumped in the comer of the sofa, but when he saw the girls he looked up hopefully.

“Did you find out anything about the letters?” he asked.

“I didn’t find the thief,” Nancy answered, “but I did pick up an excellent clue. Mr. Nixon, do you know a tall, slender man who wears a yellow overcoat and hat, and has a beat-up car with the license plate TJ12? I don’t know the rest of the numbers.”

To the surprise of Hannah Gruen and the girls, Ira Nixon uttered a cry of dismay. The blood drained from his face. He put his hands over his cheeks and exclaimed, “No, no! It couldn’t be! Oh, what will I do?”

Ira Nixon slumped forward in a faint!

CHAPTER II

Vanished Money

WHEN the mail carrier did not respond to first-aid treatment by Hannah Gruen and the girls, the housekeeper insisted they call a doctor.

"I'll telephone Dr. Amundson up the street," Nancy offered. He was not the Drews' physician, but she was sure that in this emergency he would come.

The line was busy and continued to be so. George became nervously impatient. "Oh, why bother? I can run up there just as fast." She grabbed her coat and went out the door.

While Mrs. Gruen continued to administer first aid to the unconscious mail carrier, she told Nancy and Bess more about him. Ira Nixon was a bachelor and lived in a small house on the other side of River Heights. It had belonged to his mother, who had survived two husbands. When she died, it was learned she had willed the property and a small amount of money to Ira.

But now a half brother, thirty years younger, was demanding fifty per cent of the money. So far, Ira had refused because the inheritance had actually belonged to Ira's father and the mother had kept it all these years for his son.

"Ira told me his half brother Edgar has been very nasty lately and has even threatened to go to court to upset the will."

"Poor Mr. Nixon," Bess said softly.

The housekeeper went on to say that Edgar had become very obnoxious and had almost succeeded in intimidating Ira. She sighed, "Probably Ira won't be able to hold out much longer—he's too old and weak to resist."

"Where does this half brother live?" Nancy asked.

"Ira doesn't know. Edgar never would tell him. And also, he would never tell him what business he was in. Only yesterday when Ira came

here with the mail, he told me that Edgar had been to see him the night before and became furious when Ira would not give him any money. He called him all sorts of dreadful names and finally said, "I'll make you suffer for this! I'll ruin you!"

Hannah's last statement gave Nancy an idea. "Do you suppose the person who stole the mail could have been Edgar Nixon?" she asked.

"I'll bet it was," Bess replied. "When you described him to Ira, the poor old man recognized who he was and that's why he fainted. Edgar must be an absolutely despicable person."

The others agreed. Their conversation was cut short by the arrival of George with the doctor. The girls went to the kitchen during the examination that followed, but Hannah Gruen remained with Ira.

Nancy said she should notify the police and the postal inspector about the theft. "And I'd better call Dad, too."

When her friend Police Chief McGinnis came on the wire she gave him the story.

"We'll put out an alarm for the man in the yellow coat," he told her.

Nancy next called the River Heights post office. The postal inspector was not in, but an investigative aide took the message and said he would pass the word along.

Nancy's third call was to her father's office. Mr. Drew was a prominent attorney and his daughter always felt flattered when he asked her opinion or advice on a case where a mystery was involved. In a few minutes Mr. Drew's secretary put the attorney on the line.

"Dad, we've had some real excitement at the house this morning," she said, and proceeded to tell him what had happened. "Ira Nixon hasn't regained consciousness yet. The doctor is here now."

"Well, you are full of news," Mr. Drew said. "Keep me informed on what's happening. Now about this registered letter. I'm afraid it may have contained a large sum of money."

Nancy was horrified. Did the thief know this and was it the reason he had waited for a chance to steal the mail?

"Where was the letter from?" she asked. "Isn't it unusual for people to send money through the mail nowadays?"

"Indeed it is, and a very bad thing to do," the lawyer replied. "I suspect that this registered letter may have come from a client of mine, Mrs. Quigley. I take care of most of her affairs and she sends me money every so often. I've told her repeatedly to mail me only checks, but I have a hunch that she has ignored my advice again."

“Does she always send her letters to the house?” Nancy asked.

“Usually,” Mr. Drew answered. “I’ll call her at once and find out if—Hold the line a moment, Nancy.”

She waited several seconds, then her father came back on the line. “My secretary has just buzzed me to say that Mrs. Quigley is in the outer office. I’ll talk to her and call you back.”

While waiting, Nancy told Bess and George about the client who insisted upon sending large amounts of money through the mail. It was not long before Mr. Drew called back.

“Hello? Nancy? ... What I feared is true. Mrs. Quigley feels very bad about the whole thing. We are sure it was her letter that was stolen.”

“Oh, Dad, this makes an embarrassing situation for you, doesn’t it?” Nancy queried.

“Yes, it does,” her father replied. “Having my client’s money stolen from my house!” Then he added, “How’s Ira Nixon?”

Nancy put down the phone and hurried toward the living room, calling out, “Mrs. Gruen, my father is on the line. He wants to know how Mr. Nixon is.”

“He’s coming around,” the housekeeper answered. “The doctor says he’ll have to go to the hospital, though, for a complete checkup.”

Nancy ran back to the kitchen and reported this to her father. He sighed in relief. “I’m glad the poor old man is regaining consciousness,” he said. “Well, I must talk to Mrs. Quigley now. See you at dinner.”

Mrs. Gruen came to tell the girls that they might return to the living room. Dr. Amundson explained that he must get back to his office immediately to see a number of patients who were waiting.

“Mrs. Gruen has kindly offered to get in touch with Mr. Nixon’s regular doctor,” he said. “She will ask him to make arrangements for an ambulance to come from River Heights Hospital and take Mr. Nixon there. He’s recovering nicely, but he shouldn’t go home yet.”

Ira’s physician promised to be at the hospital by the time his patient reached there. The ambulance would arrive at the Drew home in about twenty minutes. Nancy was eager to ask the carrier some questions, but realized he was in no condition to discuss his brother. “Especially one who is so mean to him,” she thought.

Ira Nixon himself brought up the subject of the missing letters. “I feel better now. Guess that doctor’s shot put new life into me. Sorry I can’t tell you where your father’s registered letter came from. I didn’t

notice."

Nancy asked gently, "Did you, by any chance, see the return address on the envelope to me?"

Ira Nixon closed his eyes and his brow furrowed as he tried to remember. Finally he said, "Seems to me your letter was not from one person. It was more like three names."

"A business firm," Nancy suggested.

Again the mail carrier tried hard to remember. Finally he shook his head. "It's not much hope I guess. My head's getting too old to remember things very long. But I seem to recall the first word in the name. It was—"

Nancy and the others waited expectantly. They could see Ira Nixon's lips move as if he was murmuring several names before saying one aloud. Finally a faint smile spread over his face.

"I remember now," he said. "Clear as a bell. The first word was Malmsbury."

"That's a wonderful help," Nancy told him. But she was thinking there probably were a lot of Malmsburys in London or its vicinity. It would take her a long time to find out who the sender of her mysterious letter was.

Just then the ambulance arrived and two interns came into the house with a stretcher.

Ira Nixon brushed the stretcher aside. "Long as I got two good legs, I'm gain' to walk," he insisted.

"I'm sorry, sir," one of the interns said, "but it's a hospital rule."

The letter carrier frowned. "You mean it's a law I've got to ride on that thing? What'll people think?"

The others smiled. The interns helped Ira Nixon onto the stretcher and carried him to the ambulance.

"We'll follow in my car," said Nancy.

She hurried to her car and the three girls hopped in. As soon as Ira Nixon was comfortably settled in the hospital, the girls said good-by and left. Nancy first took George, then Bess to their homes.

"What a morning!" Bess remarked as she waved good-by. "Keep us informed on what happens."

"I will," Nancy promised.

She had been in her own house only long enough to say to Hannah,

“What’s for lunch?” when once again the front doorbell rang. Nancy went to answer it.

A young man stood there. He introduced himself as Mr. Horace Moore, an investigative aide to the River Heights’ postal inspector.

“Are you Nancy Drew?” he asked gruffly.

“Yes, I am.”

The young man stared at her hard. Then he said, “Young lady, you’ve broken the law. You’re in trouble with the authorities!”

CHAPTER III

A Baffling Note

MR. MOORE'S accusation left Nancy speechless for a few seconds. Finally she asked him how she had broken the law.

The young man looked at her superciliously. She judged that he was not very many years older than she and his attitude annoyed her. But out of respect for his position she said nothing.

"Miss Drew," he began, "you may not be aware of this, but it is against the law to invite mail carriers into your home while they are on duty."

"I see," Nancy replied. "But don't you think this case was an exception? Poor Ira Nixon had been battling the wind for a long time and he was exhausted. Anyway, he didn't bring his mailbag inside our house. He left it in this vestibule where you are standing."

"That's even worse," the aide told her. "Our carriers know the rule—they must keep their bags with them at all times. But this doesn't excuse you."

"Perhaps not," said Nancy. "I shall take the matter up with my father and he will come to your office."

Moore was not to be dismissed so easily. In a pompous manner he asked, "What does your father have to do with this?"

Nancy looked him straight in the eye. "The law says that when anyone is accused of a crime he may consult his lawyer. My father is a lawyer."

Her caller blinked. "I—I suppose you're right. When the inspector returns, I shall pass the information along to him."

Nancy did not comment on this. She knew that the postal inspector was a very reasonable man. Surely he would understand that the case of Ira Nixon was indeed an exception.

"Are you aware," she asked Moore, "that Ira Nixon is in the hospital?"

"I heard something of the sort but this doesn't excuse him."

"And now if you'll excuse me—" Nancy said, starting to close the door.

With a mumbled reply the officious young man turned and left the house.

Mr. Drew came home early, explaining that he was so curious about what had taken place during the day he wanted to get more details from Nancy at once.

She smiled. "The whole thing gets more mysterious every minute. Listen to this." She told him about the investigative aide from the post office.

When she finished, Mr. Drew burst into laughter. "My congratulations to you on telling him you would turn the case over to your lawyer." Then he sobered. "You are not to blame, Nancy, for the stolen letters. I'm sure Postal Inspector Wernick will agree with us."

Nancy asked him how his client Mrs. Quigley had taken the loss of her money. "Was she very upset?"

"She certainly was," the lawyer replied. "My secretary had to bring smelling salts and a cup of black coffee. Finally Mrs. Quigley began to cry and admitted that she should have followed my advice and sent a check."

Father and daughter talked a long time about the whole affair. Their conversation was interrupted by a phone call for Mr. Drew. He came back from answering it to tell Nancy an emergency had arisen. "I must go at once to see a client. He has been in a bad accident. I probably won't be home until late so don't wait up for me, Nancy."

She and Hannah Gruen ate alone. To cheer up Nancy, the housekeeper suggested that they go to a movie at the River Heights Theater.

Nancy smiled. "You've talked me into it. I guess there's nothing more I can do tonight on the mystery, anyway."

By morning, however, the young detective's thoughts were back on the mystery. At breakfast and on the way to and from church, she reviewed the various angles of the mail theft.

"Dad, do you suppose with Ira Nixon's slight clue about the name Malmsbury, I could get a copy of the letter sent to me?"

Mr. Drew smiled. "I believe so. Tomorrow morning I'll make a phone call to a lawyer friend in London. I'll ask him to look in the telephone directory and see what he can find out for us."

That afternoon Nancy went to call on Ira Nixon in the hospital. He said no tests had been made yet, since it was Sunday, but these would be taken care of the following morning.

"I suppose you are wondering," he said, "whether or not I have thought of any more clues to help you find your missing letter."

He lowered his voice. "Mind you, what I'm about to say I don't believe down deep in my heart, but it will explain why I fainted yesterday at your house."

The mail carrier told about his half brother Edgar. It was a repetition of what Hannah Gruen had already revealed. Ira added, however, that when Nancy had mentioned a man in a yellow coat with a beat-up car and part of his license plate number, he had thought for a moment it wa his brother.

"But I'm sure it wasn't," he said. "Edgar may be an annoyance to me but I'm sure he's not a thief."

Nancy did not comment. Instead, she asked, "What did my little friend Tommy mean by a yellow coat?"

A smile flickered across Ira's face. "Actually it's a camel's-hair coat. His hat is too. A striking outfit and incidentally Edgar is rather handsome."

A nurse stepped into the room to announce that visiting hours were over for the afternoon. Nancy said good-by to the letter carrier and left.

The following morning Mr. Drew telephoned her from his office to report that he had talked to his friend in London. "I have good news for you, Nancy. There is a law firm in the city by the name of Malmsbury and Bates-Jones."

"I'm sure that's the one!" Nancy said excitedly.

"I hope so," her father replied. "In any case, my friend will telephone to them and find out if they sent a letter to you. He'll tell them the circumstances of your not receiving it, and request a duplicate. On the other hand, if this is not the right firm, my friend will try to find the person who did write to you."

"Dad, that's wonderful!" Nancy exclaimed. "I hope we hear something soon."

Her father chuckled. "When you were a little girl, Nancy, you were always eager to have things happen. I used to say to you, 'Hold your horses!' Now I'm saying it again. Don't get your hopes up too high."

Nancy laughed. "Spoken like a lawyer," she teased, and then said

good-by.

As soon as luncheon was over, Nancy told Hannah Gruen she was tired of staying in the house and waiting for news. “I’m going to do some investigating,” she announced.

“Where are you going?” the housekeeper asked.

“To talk to some of Ira Nixon’s neighbors. They may give me a clue that will be helpful in tracking down this Edgar Nixon. Despite Ira’s faith in him, I think he’s a good suspect.”

Mrs. Gruen agreed and kissed Nancy good-by. The young detective drove to the other side of town and found Ira Nixon’s little, old-fashioned home. As she parked in front of the house, two women crossed the street and and introduced themselves as Mrs. Malley and Mrs. O’Brien. They wanted to know if Nancy could tell them about the mail carrier’s condition.

“He’s better,” she replied. “In a way it’s fortunate that he got into the hospital.”

“It sure is,” Mrs. O’Brien interrupted her. “The poor old man doesn’t eat right.”

“Yes,” her neighbor Mrs. Malley agreed, and added, “He worries all the time about that no-good brother of his.”

Although curious to learn more about Ira’s brother, Nancy commented cautiously, “I’ve heard about Edgar. Tell me, is he really as bad as all that?”

“Well, of course, I don’t know what goes on inside the house when he comes there,” Mrs. O’Brien went on, “but I know the effect on Ira. He’s just all in after one of those visits.”

Mrs. Malley leaned forward confidentially. “Edgar was here this morning. Of course he couldn’t get in. I guess he didn’t know where his brother was. And I for one wouldn’t tell him.”

“Me either,” Mrs. O’Brien declared. “That Edgar is nasty. A lot of papers blew off the seat of his car and he wouldn’t take time to pick them up. He littered the street and we had to go around and clean up.”

Nancy asked eagerly, “Where are the papers now?”

“We put them in a trash can—good place for them.”

“They might be important,” said Nancy. “May I see them?”

The two women looked at each other, puzzled, but led the girl to Mrs. Malley’s back yard. She opened the trash can and said, “There

they are."

Nancy lifted them out one by one. All were letters and looked as if they had fallen into water. Most of the writing was illegible. One had had the top torn from it, and all but a few words had been obliterated, but the remaining few caught Nancy's attention. This must be part of the letter which had come to her from London! All that remained was:

.....Drew: ..... money has been left.....

"I'd like to take this one along," she said.

"Help yourself," said Mrs. Malley. "They don't belong to me anyway. They're just trash."

"I suggest," said Nancy, "That you call the postal inspector and tell him about these letters."

She rushed home. Her father was there and she showed the sheet to him and Hannah Gruen. Both were amazed but unable to decipher the intriguing message.

"Do you suppose somebody in England has left me some money?" Nancy asked.

"It looks that way," her father replied. "But who could it be?"

After staring at the paper for a while, Nancy began to calm down. "I'm sure there must be some mistake," she said. "I'm certainly not going to get my hopes up of becoming a millionaire!"

Her father and Mrs. Gruen laughed and said this was a sensible attitude to take. "But," the housekeeper added, "I hope a copy of the whole letter will come soon. I can't stand the suspense myself."

On Tuesday morning Nancy told Hannah Gruen that she was going on a shopping trip. "You remember I'm going to spend the weekend at Emerson College? I need a few things and this is a good time to get them."

As she was about to pull out of the driveway, Nancy spotted a battered tan car parked down the street. It suddenly occurred to her that Edgar Nixon or whoever had stolen the letters from the Drew home might be watching her.

At this distance the person inside the car was too indistinct for her to identify, but she decided to get a closer look and started down the block. At once the other car moved ahead. As she drew nearer, the driver suddenly turned around. The next second he shot off at high speed.

“He certainly acts guilty,” Nancy thought, and gave her own car greater power.

Abruptly the man turned down a side street, went a few blocks without pausing at intersections, and turned left out of sight. Nancy followed as quickly as she dared.

When she reached the spot where he had made the last turn Nancy could see him in the distance. The road proved to be an undeveloped one and had no side streets. She was able to follow more quickly and soon almost caught up to him. Now she could see the license plate. It was TJ12796.

“That is Edgar Nixon!” she thought. “I mustn’t lose him!”

In the next few seconds Nancy neared a wooden bridge. She was almost directly behind the fugitive now.

“This bridge looks pretty rickety,” she said to herself. “Do I dare cross it?”

Edgar Nixon took the chance and sped over it. He made the distance without anything happening. Nancy went after him but drove cautiously. Her car was much heavier, she knew.

When Nancy was at the halfway mark, cracking sounds came from the dilapidated bridge!

CHAPTER IV

Doubtful Inheritance

IN a flash Nancy shifted to reverse. The convertible shot backward just in time to keep it from breaking through the bridge.

"Oh!" she said aloud.

Shaken by her experience, Nancy pulled to the side of the road and parked. When her heart stopped pounding, she began to think once more about Edgar Nixon.

"I wonder where he went," she thought.

Nancy turned around and went back to River Heights. She stopped at police headquarters and asked to see Chief McGinnis. The desk sergeant buzzed his superior officer, and after a short conversation to announce Nancy, told her to go into the man's private office.

He smiled at her. "More clues?" he asked.

"Yes, one. I don't know how good it is." She told him about having spotted Edgar Nixon's car. While she was not sure he was the person driving it, Nancy felt it was worthwhile to follow up the lead.

"The road had no signs, but it's the one with the old bridge. He got across but I almost crashed through into the water."

The chief frowned. "Nancy, you must be more careful."

She asked him whether he had any news for her. He shook his head. "Not a single clue to that man's whereabouts," McGinnis said. "But I'll put some men on this new clue right away. Thanks for coming in, Nancy."

Before returning home, she decided to stop at the hospital and visit Ira Nixon. When Nancy arrived at his room, she was surprised to find a strange man in it.

"You looking for the mail carrier?" he asked.

"Yes."

“He’s gone home—after the doctor saw him this morning he said Ira could go. Nice old fellow. I hope he gets along all right.”

Nancy hoped so too. She looked at her watch. “I’ll go to see him at his home after lunch,” she told the patient.

By two o’clock she was at Ira Nixon’s house, carrying a jar of Mrs. Gruen’s homemade stew. When she rang, he called, “Come in.” Nancy found him reclining on a couch in his tiny living room. He looked much better than he had on Sunday.

“Hannah Gruen sent you this stew,” Nancy said. She smiled. “I can tell you it’s delicious.”

“That housekeeper of yours is a fine, kind woman,” Ira Nixon said. “And she’s one of a few people a man likes to confide in.”

Nancy did not want to upset the mail carrier so she refrained from mentioning Edgar, but Ira brought up the subject himself.

“Would you like to see a picture of Edgar?”

“Oh yes,” Nancy replied.

He brought it from a desk drawer and Nancy gazed at the photograph. As Ira had said, Edgar was handsome, but his eyes were as cold as steel and she instantly felt that he was not a person who could be trusted. She refrained from saying anything, except that he was an attractive-looking man.

Ira Nixon smiled. “The girls always liked him and he liked them, but he never got married.”

“May I borrow this photograph?” Nancy asked.

The mail carrier misunderstood her request. He remarked with a grin, “So you like him too—same as the rest of the ladies.”

Nancy did not comment. He must not know right now she wanted the picture for identification. She rose, and said she must go.

“I’ll put this stew in your refrigerator,” Nancy said.

“Thank you. I’ll have some for my dinner. And please thank Mrs. Gruen.”

Nancy slipped the photograph into her purse, then carried the jar of stew to the kitchen. Driving home, she wondered just how she might use Edgar’s photograph to get more information about him. Nancy decided first to find Tommy and went to his house.

Without telling her suspicions, she held up the photograph for him to look at. Instantly he said, “He’s the man in the yellow coat!”

Nancy was thrilled—this seemed to identify Edgar Nixon positively as the thief who had stolen his half brother's mail. But before reporting this to the postal inspector, Nancy decided to investigate the gas stations in River Heights and on the outskirts for further proof. She drove from one to another, but none of the attendants remembered ever having seen the man in the photograph.

"Guess he buys his gas somewhere else," most of them remarked.

Nancy was becoming discouraged. She was about to give up when she recalled having once stopped at a small place on the outskirts of River Heights. The station was on the road leading to Emerson, where Ned's college was located. She turned the car in that direction and a few minutes later pulled up to the pump. A pleasant young man came to help her.

"Five gallons, please," Nancy said. When the attendant finished putting it in, she paid him, then pulled out the photograph of Edgar Nixon.

"Has this man ever stopped here for gas?" she asked.

The attendant studied the picture a few moments. "Yes, he's been in several times. For a moment I didn't recognize him. When he comes here, he's always wearing a hat and overcoat."

"Are they camel's hair?" Nancy asked quickly.

"That's the man."

Nancy inquired if the attendant knew his name and where he lived.

"No. He's not the talkative type. Somehow I got the idea, though, that he lives in some distant town but comes to River Heights quite often. He never says why."

"How recently has he been here?"

The man's answer startled Nancy. "Come to think of it, he stopped yesterday. I suppose you're trying to find him. Maybe this will help you. He made a phone call from that booth over there and as I went by I heard him say 'Miss Drew.' "

"Is that all you heard?" Nancy asked, astounded.

"That's all." The attendant turned away to serve an arriving customer.

Nancy drove off, wondering whether Edgar Nixon could have been talking about her.

As Nancy let herself into the Drew house about twenty minutes later, she was just in time to answer the telephone. Her father was

calling.

"Nancy, I'd like you to come down here immediately. I have something amazing to show you."

"I'll be there right away."

She dashed back outside and turned her convertible in the direction of her father's office. After saying hello to his secretary, Miss Hanson, Nancy went directly into Mr. Drew's private office.

He handed her a letter, saying, "What do you think of this new mystery?"

Nancy sat down in a big chair and started to read. Her eyes grew larger and larger. The letter was from London on the stationery of Malmsbury and Bates-Jones. It read:

My dear Miss Drew:

This is to inform you it is possible an inheritance has been left to you. We are the legal representatives of the Estate of Jonathan Smith, late of Little Coddington, Midhampton, Berks., who died intestate on May 2, last. Mr. Smith had as only kin a sister, from whom he was estranged, Mrs. Genevieve Smith Drew. We find she predeceased Mr. Smith by five years, leaving a daughter who is Mr. Smith's sole heir by law.

We have learned that the daughter, Miss Nancy Smith Drew, is in the United States, where our agents have been trying to trace her. You are the only Miss Nancy Drew so far discovered by them, and we beg of you to communicate with us.

If you happen to be the Miss Drew for whom we are searching, will you be so good as to submit proofs of your identity, whereupon we shall be happy to make arrangements for your return to England to claim the inheritance.

Sincerely, A. E. Lionel Bates-Jones

When Nancy finished reading the letter, she looked at her father who had been watching her closely. He smiled. "You were almost an heiress," the lawyer said with a chuckle.

Nancy sighed. "How I wish I was the right Nancy Drew!"

Her father's eyes twinkled. "Then you wouldn't have the fun of a mystery to solve," he said.

"You're right," she agreed. "May I use one of your phones and start trying to find Nancy Smith Drew?"

“Go ahead. In the meantime I’ll make an overseas call to this law firm and tell them the facts.”

Nancy waited while he gave the number, but the lawyer was told that the Atlantic lines would be tied up for several hours. He turned to Nancy. “Maybe you’ll have this case solved before I can put through the phone call!” he teased.

His daughter laughed. “I wish it was that easy.”

Nancy phoned the police department and the post office. Nancy Smith Drew was not known at either place. Directories and telephone books gave no clue.

Nancy said good-by to her father and drove home. Bess and George were there, and were eager to hear the latest news. When Nancy gave them all the facts, the cousins gasped.

George remarked, “Things are certainly breaking fast. Now you have two mysteries on your hands. Well, tell us what we can do to help.”

“Right now I don’t have an idea in my head,” Nancy confessed, “but I’ll let you know.”

She invited the girls to stay to dinner and they accepted at once. Mr. Drew had already told Hannah Gruen he would not be home until later so the four of them ate without him. They had just finished dessert when the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” said Nancy.

When she opened the door a strange woman angrily forced her way inside and stepped toward the living room. The caller was poorly dressed in a worn-looking coat. Its collar was pulled up to her stringy, bleached hair.

“You’re Nancy Drew, ain’t you?”

When the girl nodded, the woman added, “You’re the one I’m looking for!”

With that, her fist shot out and she tried to hit Nancy.

CHAPTER V

The Mysterious Gift

THOUGH taken unawares, Nancy managed to dodge the woman's blow. She grabbed the stranger's arm and held it firm.

"What are you trying to do?" she asked. "What do you want?"

"What I want are my rights!" the woman shouted.

"Who are you?" Nancy asked. She was sure she had never seen the woman before.

"I am Mrs. Skeets, and now that you've heard it you'll never forget it. And don't tell me you're not Nancy Drew, because I've seen you go running around town in that car of yours. I don't approve of young girls having cars. There are too many accidents as it is."

"Did you come here to lecture me about my driving?" Nancy asked the woman coldly.

"Certainly not. Anyway, I know it wouldn't do no good. Girls today don't mind what their elders think. They go flyin' around as if they owned the earth."

"Will you please get to the point," Nancy interrupted her caller.

"Don't be pert, miss," Mrs. Skeets said. "I'll tell you in my own good time why I came here."

Nancy gritted her teeth. Was this woman unbalanced? She decided that perhaps if she did not answer, Mrs. Skeets would finally tell why she had come.

"Well, what you got to say about what you did?" the woman demanded.

Nancy heaved a sigh. "Mrs. Skeets, will you please tell me why you came here. I am not aware that I have ever met you or done anything to you."

"Well, to begin with, I'm Mrs. Maud Skeets. I'm Sailor Joe Skeets's wife, which is my bad luck. Never forgive him for forever sailin' off to

all comers of the world and leavin' me to get along the best I can."

The woman took a deep breath before going on. "Joe's got a sister. She don't look like him and she don't act like him neither. One thing I must say, he ain't stingy. But that sister of his—all the money in the world and her not turnin' a finger, but the money just pourin' in because her husband invented some sort of stuff that takes stains out of cloth. Well, she condescends to send me ten dollars a week if you please. And where was last week's I ask you?" She stared hard at Nancy.

"I haven't the least idea," Nancy replied. "What makes you think I should know something about it?"

"Because my letter was in that bunch that was stolen from your house and you're to blamel" Mrs. Skeets almost screamed.

Nancy was amazed. She told the woman that she certainly was not to blame for the mail theft. "I never saw any of the letters that were taken. Perhaps yours wasn't among them."

"The day it was supposed to come was Saturday and one thing I will say about Joe's sister, she's always on time. No, that letter with the money in it was stolen!"

"I'm terribly sorry," said Nancy, "but as I said before I'm not to blame. Since there is nothing more to discuss I'll bid you good-by." She held the door open.

"Now see here, young lady, you aren't goin' to get rid of me that fast. You give me the ten dollars and I'll go."

Nancy's reply was firm. "I am not giving you ten dollars."

Mrs. Skeets tossed her head. "Uppity, eh?" she said. Then, seeing Bess, George, and Hannah Gruen who had come to the hall to see what the trouble was, she said sneeringly, "Reinforcements, eh? Well, that won't do you no good.

“You’re to blame!” Mrs. Skeets screamed

You’re just like all the other Nancy Drews.”

“What do you mean?” Nancy demanded. “Have you known many?”

“Have I known many of them? Thank goodness, no!” Mrs. Skeets said, flinging her hands into the air. “Just you and the other one, and you’re both cut out of the same cloth. Cheat people out of ten dollars and then pretend they’re fine ladies and don’t know nothin’ about it.”

Nancy asked Mrs. Skeets about the other Nancy Drew, but the

woman refused to tell her anything.

"I'll make a bargain with you," she said. "You give me ten dollars and I'll tell you."

Nancy was wary that this might be a ruse of some kind and decided to try a few tactics of her own.

"If I change my mind, I'll come to see you tomorrow," she told Mrs. Skeets.

"Suits me." The woman grinned. "I'll bet you'll be around to see me. My house is 22 Cottage Street. It's not far from here, but it's not a grand neighborhood like yours. We're just plain folks over there."

With this cutting remark, she turned and went outside.

"Boy is she ever a weirdo!" George exclaimed.

Further discussion was interrupted by the telephone. Hannah Gruen picked it up, and in a moment said, "It's your father, Nancy, and he says it's important."

"I finally got an overseas call through to Mr. Bates-Jones," Mr. Drew said. "Nancy, the inheritance is sizable. He wants you to solve the mystery of the missing Nancy Drew!"

The girl chuckled. "Wonderful! Nothing I'd like better. And, Dad, I have a clue."

"What is it?"

She related the visit of the strange Mrs. Skeets, including the bargain to exchange information for the ten dollars. "Do you think I should do it?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then I'll go there tomorrow morning."

The following day, while Nancy was tidying up her room before leaving the house, Mrs. Gruen came in, holding a long evening dress over one arm.

"You haven't forgotten you're going to wear this Saturday evening, have you?" she teased.

"I'm afraid I had."

The housekeeper reminded her that the dress had to be shortened. "You'd break your neck in it at this length," she said. "Please put it on now and let me pin up the hem. Then I'll sew it while you're gone."

Nancy took off her skirt and sweater and slipped on the pale-blue evening dress. Glancing at herself in the mirror, she realized

something was missing. Nancy studied herself as Hannah pinned up the skirt and kept telling her to turn a little at a time.

Suddenly Nancy realized what the costume needed—the lovely pearl necklace Mr. Drew had given her on her last birthday.

"The clasp is loose," she thought. "Before I go to Mrs. Skeets's house, I'll run down to the jeweler's with the necklace and have it fixed."

As soon as the housekeeper had finished pinning the hem, Nancy took off the dress. She put on her sports clothes once more, took the necklace from a drawer, and grabbed a coat.

"Wish me luck," she said, kissing Mrs. Gruen good-by. "I hope to bring home lots of news."

She drove directly to the center of town and parked. Mr. Whittier's jewelry shop was a block away. Nancy hurried down the street and entered the store.

"Good morning, Mr. Whittier," she said to the elderly man behind the counter. "I think the clasp on my pearl necklace needs tightening."

She took it from her purse.

The jeweler looked at it closely. "It certainly does," he said. "Are you in a hurry for it?"

Nancy told him she planned to take the necklace with her on Friday. "I'm going to Emerson for the weekend."

"Then I'll fix this right away."

As Mr. Whittier went to a room at the rear of the shop, he called out, "You caught me at a good time. I'm not particularly busy now. Make yourself comfortable."

While waiting, Nancy looked at the large assortment of rings, bracelets, pins, and other bits of jewelry in the display cases. How beautiful they all were!

Time passed quickly and soon the jeweler returned. He showed Nancy that the clasp worked perfectly now.

As he was wrapping it for her, Mr. Whittier said, "How did you like your beautiful new pin?"

"Pin?" Nancy repeated. "What pin?"

"The one that man got for you yesterday. He said he was going to give it to you right away."

Nancy was puzzled. What man was going to give her a pin?

CHATTER. VI

A Good Lead

“You look surprised,” said Mr. Whittier. “I guess I gave away a secret.”

“Oh, it’s all right,” Nancy assured him without divulging what was racing through her mind. The pin might be going to Nancy Smith Drew and here was her chance to find the heiress!

Nancy did not reveal her thoughts, however. Smiling, she said, “I must confess I haven’t the least idea who might be giving me a pin, but it sounds exciting. I don’t suppose you want to tell me who he is?”

The jeweler sighed. “I’ve told so much already I guess it won’t matter. He said his name was Mr. Nixon and that he is from out of town.”

Nancy was startled. Was he Edgar Nixon? Was he a friend of the heiress or of some other Nancy Drew?

“Maybe Edgar Nixon is going to give the pin to me, but there’ll be some trick to it if he does,” Nancy decided.

Mr. Whittier looked at her quizzically. “You seem kind of worried,” he remarked. “I’m sorry I said anything. And please, when Mr. Nixon hands you the pin, don’t let on I gave away a secret.”

Nancy assured him she would not.

Suddenly she smiled. “If this man is the person I think he is, he’s related to someone I know very well. Would you mind telling me what he looks like?”

“Well, he’s kind of handsome you might say,” Mr. Whittier replied. “Very thin and dark.”

“What was he wearing?” Nancy asked.

She was not surprised to learn that the purchaser of the pin had worn a camel’s-hair coat and hat. In her mind this settled it. The buyer was indeed Edgar Nixon. But where did she possibly fit into the picture?

Mr. Whittier handed Nancy the necklace. “Come in again soon,” he invited her. “I’ll have all my Christmas things on display next week.”

His suggestion gave Nancy an idea. Recalling a remark her father had made, she said, “Mr. Whittier, in a magazine advertisement I saw a special kind of cuff links I know my dad would like. They were large gold squares and had diagonal stripes of black across them. I’d like a set to give Dad for Christmas.”

“I know the pattern well,” said Mr. Whittier. “I’ll order a pair if you like.”

“Please do, and let me know when they come in.”

“Speaking of cuff links,” said the jeweler, “Mr. Nixon bought a pair for himself. Kind of flashy but he seemed to like them. They were bright red and had a black star in the center.”

Instantly Nancy thought what an excellent identification this was. Aloud she said, “I don’t think I’d care for them myself.”

Shortly thereafter, Nancy left the shop and walked to her convertible, deep in thought. She had just picked up two good leads!

Nancy went directly to the Skeets’s home on Cottage Street. Although it was not far from the Drews’, she had never been in this particular area. The houses were rather shabby, many of them needing paint, but they were neat and the windows glistened. The small lawns in front of them were well kept. Nancy drove slowly until she came to number twenty-two.

The bell knob on the seaman’s cottage door was brightly polished. In answer to Nancy’s ring, the door was opened by a grizzled, elderly man.

“Howdy,” he said, smiling affably. “We don’t want to subscribe to any magazines, thanky.”

“I’m not selling anything.” Nancy laughed. “I came to see Mrs. Skeets.”

“Well, she hoisted anchor here about an hour ago,” he said. “I expect she just rode around to the chandler for some supplies and most likely she’ll be back by six bells.”

Nancy grinned. “You mean eleven o’clock, Mr. Skeets?”

“Call me Sailor Joe like the rest of the folks.” He grinned broadly. “Yes, miss. Six bells on a ship is ‘leven o’clock.”

“Then your wife will be back very soon,” Nancy said, glancing at her wrist watch. “May I wait?”

"Heave your anchor, lass," Joe said. "Come into the parlor."

Chuckling, he led Nancy into the living room. It was papered in deep red and furnished in a variety of shabby furniture. On the walls were pictures of ships, a broken but highly polished sextant, a lethal-looking spear, and a large dried starfish.

Nancy sat down on a couch and remarked, "Sailing all over the world, you must have seen many interesting things, Mr. Skeets."

"Aye, and so I have." Sailor Joe grinned, settling himself in a captain's chair. "Why, a funny thing happened to me one time when I had shore leave in Melbourne, Australia. For fun I told one of the dockhands I was a pearl diver. And me not being able to swim a stroke. That night after

I'd gone to sleep, somebody came and carried me away. Next thing I knew I'd been shanghied onto a boat that was really going pearl diving."

Sailor Joe laughed uproariously. Nancy wondered what was so funny about this. Instead, it seemed tragic.

"I see you don't understand the joke," the old salt went on. "You see where I was brought up us sailors meant washin' dishes when we said pearl divin'." The old man rocked with laughter and slapped his knees with great calloused hands. Nancy laughed too but did not want Joe to get started on another one of his sea yarns. She was eager to ask him some questions before his wife returned.

"How long have you lived here?" she asked.

"Maybe a year, maybe two," Joe said. "My old woman moved out here so I'd be far from the sea and maybe stay home more. But I could smell salt water if I was in the middle of a desert! Speaking of deserts, I must tell you—"

Nancy interrupted quickly. "Did you ever know a young woman by the name of Nancy Drew?"

"Nancy Drew? Well, I'll say I did, and a trim little figurehead she was, and as neat as an admiral's cutter. Did you know her?"

Nancy shook her head. "I'm trying to locate a Nancy Smith Drew who's wanted in England," she said.

Sailor Joe whistled "Wanted in England, is she? And for what? That girl never did a wrong thing in her life."

"Oh, she isn't wanted by the authorities," Nancy hastened to say. "A relative died and left her some money."

“Ah-ha! That’s a jib of another cut.” Joe grinned. “Yes, Nancy Smith Drew used to room with my missus in New York. She kept a roomin’ house then.

“Well, well, I’m glad Miss Drew come into some money, for she was hard up, that she was. Studying for the stage, and a fine figure of an actress she’d ’a’ made. Tall and beautiful with a fine deep voice.”

Nancy was excited. “Where is Nancy Smith Drew now?”

Sailor Joe went on, “She couldn’t get to sign with no theater, and at last she left us to go to some beach with a family as a governess.”

Nancy was wildly elated at this clue. “When Was this?” she asked.

“Oh, that was maybe ten—no, not that long. Let me see now. I remember I brought her back a souvenir and she was gone when I docked. What did I bring her? You’d never guess. A little monkey! I got it from a Portuguese—down in Brazil. I’d made a voyage to Rio in —Why, I remember now. It was just eight years ago next spring that Miss Drew left us.”

Eight years ago! Nancy’s heart sank.

“Do you remember the name of the family she went with?” she asked.

Sailor Joe pursed his lips and frowned. Presently he said, “English folks, I think. Name of Hilt something, or was it Washington? You know what? I gave that monkey to a man in exchange for a pair of boots.”

As the old man burst into laughter again, Nancy felt more encouraged than ever, now that she had found another clue. Her thoughts were interrupted by an exclamation from Joe.

“Ahoy! Here comes the missus now. I know her step on the quarterdeck.”

He jumped to his feet and rushed to open the door for Mrs. Skeets. Her arms were loaded with bundles.

“Brisket corned beef is what you’ll get for supper because it’s the cheapest cut in the market,” the woman announced.

“Salt horse again!” exclaimed her husband. “Well, never mind. We got company.”

Mrs. Skeets walked into the living room and saw Nancy. “Humph! It’s you, is it!” She sniffed.

Without another word she passed through to the rear of the house and it was some minutes before the woman returned.

"Did you bring the money?" she asked.

"Hey, what's all this palaverin' about?" Joe demanded in annoyance.

"This is the young lady who's responsible for the disappearance of the letter from your sister that had ten dollars in it. I went around to her house. I suppose you've got the money with you?"

Joe looked from his wife to Nancy in bewilderment. "But this young lady didn't steal the money, did she?"

"I'm askin' no questions," Mrs. Skeets said stiffly. "All I want is our ten dollars."

Nancy smiled at Sailor Joe. "I'm glad you don't think I stole the money," she said. "Of course I didn't. A batch of letters was taken from our house, and your wife seems to think that a letter from your sister was among them."

"Well, I ain't goin' to let you pay one cent," Joe roared. "Not even a stevedore would agree to that."

"Nevertheless I made a bargain with your wife," Nancy told him. "I said I would give her the ten dollars in exchange for some information about Nancy Smith Drew."

"You see?" Mrs. Skeets said loftily. "Well, a bargain's a bargain. Let me see the ten dollars and then I'll talk."

Nancy took the money from her purse and held it up. She told the woman of the conversation that she had had with her husband. "I understand that Nancy Smith Drew was engaged as a governess by some English people several years ago."

"That's right, but Joe told you too much.

'Course this was a long time ago and I don't think it'll do you much good tryin' to find Nancy Smith Drew there. The name of the people was Wilson and they was stayin' at the Breakers Hotel somewhere on Cape Cod."

Nancy turned over the ten-dollar bill and started for the door. "Thank you both for the information. I shall try hard to find this other Nancy Drew. Mrs. Skeets, ask your husband to tell you about her inheritance."

As soon as Nancy reached home, she consulted the long-distance operator in order to dial the Breakers Hotel on Cape Cod. Finally she was given the number and put in the call. The man who answered said the place was closed for the winter. He was only the caretaker.

“I’m trying to locate people named Wilson who perhaps spend the summers there,” Nancy said. “Could you give me their winter address?”

“No,” the man replied. “I don’t know the names of the summer guests and all the hotel’s books are locked up. Maybe if you call next summer you can find out.”

Nancy put down the phone and stared into space. Once more she had run into a stone wall. How should she proceed now?

As she sat lost in thought, the phone rang. She picked up the instrument and said, “Hello.”

“Hi, Nancy!”

“Ned!”

“How’s everything?” Ned Nickerson asked.

“You mean about the weekend? Just fine. Bess and George and I are driving up on Friday. We’ll come right to Omega Chi Epsilon House. Okay?”

“That’s what I was going to ask you to do. You girls will be staying here.”

“Ned,” Nancy said, “I’m busy solving two new mysteries.”

She went on to give him a detailed account of Edgar Nixon, the stolen mail, and finally the mysterious letter which had come from England for Nancy Smith Drew.

At the end she laughed and said, “Of course I expect your help.”

It was Ned’s turn to chuckle. “I might be able to help you sooner than you think. You know there’s to be a play Friday night—one of Shakespeare’s. The dramatic society engaged a coach to come out from New York especially for it. She’s a woman—and her name is N. Smith Drew!”

CHAPTER VII

The Wrecked Car

"OH, Ned, do you mean it?" Nancy exclaimed. "Will you find out if the coach's first name is Nancy?"

He promised to do this and then added, "You'll be able to meet her Friday night. If she is Nancy Smith Drew, I won't tell her about the inheritance. I'll leave that for you."

Ned said he would call Nancy back as soon as he found out. "I won't leave the house until you do!" she told him.

It was an hour before Ned called back. "I didn't learn much," he reported. "Miss Drew was suddenly called away and she won't return until just before the show."

Nancy was disappointed but knew she must be patient. After all this was Wednesday. Friday evening was not too far away.

Ned changed the subject. With laughter in his voice, he said, "Who do you think is temporary coach? Burt Eddleton!"

Nancy giggled. George Fayne's date hardly seemed like the type to be coaching a Shakespearcan play. He was a blond, husky football player who was full of fun.

"I can't wait," Nancy said. "Does Burt have a secret aspiration for becoming an actor after college?"

Ned laughed. "I doubt it."

The couple talked a few minutes longer, then they said good-by. Nancy's thoughts turned back to her visit at the Skeets's home and the information she had received.

Suddenly she told herself, "Maybe if N. Smith Drew, the coach, is Nancy Smith Drew from England, she went to see the Wilsons where she used to work as governess. If I could only find them!"

Nancy went upstairs. Hannah Gruen was still hemming the dance dress. Often when the girl sleuth was puzzled, she talked over the

situation with the understanding housekeeper. Now she told her of the latest report from Ned Nickerson.

"I wish I knew where to find the Wilsons," Nancy said. "Have you any hunches?"

"If they summer in Cape Cod, possibly they live in the Boston area," was Mrs. Gruen's first guess.

"Yes," Nancy said slowly. "But lots of people from other places go there too. What would be your second choice?"

"How about Springfield, Massachusetts?"

After a ten-minute conversation between them, Nancy came up with an idea which Mrs. Gruen thought was very plausible. Nancy Smith Drew had been in New York studying for the stage. If the N. Smith Drew at Emerson was the same person, she had no doubt succeeded in finding a place in the theatrical world—at least as a coach. There was a good possibility that the Wilsons, for whom she went to work as a governess, lived in New York City.

"I put a New York City phone book in your father's study," Mrs. Gruen told Nancy. "But I'll bet there are hundreds of people named Wilson in it."

Nancy hurried off. One look at all the Wilsons in New York City would have discouraged a less determined person. She took a pencil from her father's desk and began to check likely addresses.

She told herself that if the Wilsons could afford a governess, they were probably well-to-do. This meant they would live in one of the nice areas of the city. Consequently Nancy eliminated all the business and professional addresses. Her list of likely candidates turned out to be long, but she decided to start telephoning each one.

"Our phone bill will be tremendous," she told herself as call after call was made with no success.

Half an hour later Nancy heaved a sigh. Should she go on? Many things might have happened to the Wilsons she was trying to locate. They could have died or moved away.

"But I mustn't give up," Nancy told herself, and began to dial another number.

When a woman answered, Nancy said, "Is this Mrs. Wilson?"

"Yes."

"I'm making a long-distance call to you to ask a question. Did you ever employ a governess named Nancy Smith Drew?"

Nancy held her breath as she waited for the answer. “Who is calling?” the woman asked.

“Believe it or not, my name is also Nancy Drew. By chance I heard of Nancy Smith Drew and I’m trying to locate her. I received a letter by mistake which belongs to her.”

There was a pause, then Mrs. Wilson said, “This is a great coincidence. Yes, a Miss Nancy Smith Drew worked for us a few years ago. She’s a very lovely person and an excellent actress. Unfortunately I do not know where she is right now. Once in a while she sends us a postcard or a Christmas message. As a matter of fact, it has been almost a year since her last note, in which she said she was moving but did not give her future address.”

Nancy was disappointed that the actress did not visit the Wilsons, but said, “I’m so thrilled to have located someone at last who knows Miss Drew. I must tell you what was in her letter. She has a large inheritance waiting for her in England.”

“How exciting!” Mrs. Wilson exclaimed. “I’m so glad for her.”

She and Nancy chatted for a few more minutes, then the woman said, “I’m sure I’ll hear from Miss Drew at Christmastime. I’ll tell her to get in touch with you at once. Where can she reach you?”

Nancy gave her address and telephone number and thanked Mrs. Wilson for her help. As soon as the conversation ended, Nancy went back to Hannah Gruen and told her the good news.

“Now I have two good leads. If the coach at Emerson is *not* Nancy Smith Drew, then by Christmastime we should hear from the right one.”

Mrs. Gruen smiled. “I can see why you’re a good detective,” she remarked. “If you don’t find hidden gold under one stone, you turn up another.”

The housekeeper suggested that they take time out for lunch. After eating, the two returned to Nancy’s bedroom to see if the evening dress was all right. Nancy kicked off her sports shoes, removed her skirt and sweater, then stepped into the dance dress. Hannah zipped it up.

Just then the phone rang and Nancy went into her father’s study to answer it. Chief McGinnis was calling.

“I thought you’d be interested to hear, Nancy, that we found the beat-up car with the license number TJ12796.”

“You did?” Nancy exclaimed. “Where? And did you find Edgar

Nixon too?"

"No, unfortunately." The officer explained that the car had been abandoned and was a complete wreck.

"We came across it on that road where you saw the man drive across the bridge," McGinnis added. "A little way beyond there was a sharp curve and I guess he was going too fast and didn't make it. But he evidently wasn't hurt much because he wasn't around and we've had no report from the hospital or any doctors about a person who needed attention."

"The car really did belong to Edgar Nixon?" Nancy asked.

"We don't know," McGinnis replied. "It was registered under another name with a phony address. Maybe the car was Nixon's, maybe a friend's."

"Or Edgar could be using aliases," Nancy thought.

The chief said if he had any further report he would telephone Nancy. "We're still looking for a man who wears a camel's-hair coat and hat, but we suspect that by this time he may have changed to something different."

"Perhaps," said Nancy. "But if he had a beat-up car and is demanding money from his brother Ira, I'd say he isn't very well off. Men's winter overcoats are expensive and I wonder if he could afford two of them."

Chief McGinnis laughed. "I admire the way your mind works, Nancy. What you just said is very true." He chuckled. "I guess we'll keep on looking for a man in a camel's-hair overcoat and hat."

As Nancy started back to her room so that Hannah Gruen could look at the dress, the front doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Nancy called.

As she walked toward the stairway, Nancy realized that in her stocking feet the dress was pretty long. Just as she reached the top step, Nancy stepped on the front of the gown.

She heard a loud rip and gasped. At the same moment, she lost her balance and pitched forward!

CHAPTER VIII

Disheartening Request

As Nancy pitched forward she made a wild grab for the banister of the stairway. Though she swung around and almost lost her grip, Nancy managed to keep from falling.

"How stupid of me!" she chided herself, and went on down the stairway.

Nancy looked at the big rip in her lovely dress. Could it be mended without showing? "Oh, I hope Hannah can do something with it!"

She finally reached the bottom step and went on to the front door. When Nancy opened it, she was greeted by a grinning little boy.

"Hello," said Tommy Johnson.

"Hi, Tommy!" Nancy replied. "What are you holding behind your back?" she asked.

"A surprise," he said.

"For me?"

"Maybe. You know you promised me a'tective badge for helping you."

"So I did," said Nancy. "Come in, Tommy. I'll get it for you right away."

Nancy hurried off to the dining room where there was a closet that held all sorts of knickknacks. Among them was a toy detective badge which someone had given her at a party for a joke. She carried it to Tommy, who took it but still kept one hand behind his back.

"Do you like it?" Nancy asked.

"Sure I do. Would you put it on me, Nancy? After that, I'll show you what's in my other hand."

She pinned the badge onto his heavy sports jacket, then asked, "Have you brought me something exciting?"

"It's—what you say a clue," Tommy replied stoutly.

From behind his back he took out a man's rather worn shoe. Tommy explained that his little friend Billy down the street had picked it up.

"He saw it fall out of the yellow-coat man's car trunk," the little boy explained. "He just told me about it. I thought you might want the shoe, so I promised him some candy if he gave it to me. Do you have some candy?"

Nancy laughed and patted Tommy on the head. "Indeed I have and you shall have some as well as Billy. This is good detective work, Tommy. Keep it up and maybe someday you'll be a police chief."

"Oh boy, that would be something!" Tommy replied.

Nancy went to get two small jars of hard candy. She called them her emergency treats for just such occasions.

When she returned, Tommy's eyes expanded. "You mean I can have one whole jar, and Billy can have the other?"

Nancy nodded. "I think you both earned this reward."

Tommy went off, declaring that he was going to hunt for more clues to the yellow-coat man.

"I hope you don't catch him too soon," he called over his shoulder and Nancy giggled.

After she had closed the door, Nancy looked at the shoe thoroughly. She could see no identification of any sort. "But probably the police can find something," she thought. "I'll call Chief McGinnis and see what he has to say."

Fortunately he was in his office. "I'd say it's an excellent clue," he told her. "But don't bother to come down here now. Tomorrow will do."

Then Nancy climbed the stairs and showed Hannah the rip in her dress. The housekeeper said she was glad Nancy had not been hurt. She looked at the tear for some time.

"You really made a good job of this while you were at it," she commented. "Well, take the dress off and I'll see what I can do with it."

Nancy said first she would slip on shoes with heels to see if the length of the dress was all right. She found it was, then took off the dress. Hannah turned it inside out.

"Good thing this rip is near a seam. It won't hurt to make the skirt a little narrower. I'll just put in a whole new seam."

“Oh, you are a darling!” Nancy said, and gave the housekeeper a kiss on the cheek.

Then she told Mrs. Gruen about the shoe. “It dropped out of the car that we think belonged to Edgar Nixon.”

“Hm!” the housekeeper said. “I hope that shoe gets out of here in a hurry. I’m sure it’s contaminated with bad luck.”

“Why, Hannah, I’ve never heard you speak like that before.”

“I can’t help it,” the housekeeper replied, starting to baste a new seam in the dress. “The man is no good, and I don’t want any of his belongings around here.”

When she finished sewing, Hannah laid the dress down and announced that she would have to start dinner. Nancy went downstairs to help her. She set the table and prepared a salad of tomatoes and cottage cheese.

“I won’t put the steak on until your father comes,” Mrs. Gruen remarked.

Nancy heard a step on the back porch. “I guess you can broil the steak now,” she said, moving toward the door.

She opened it and her father entered. He kissed her, said good evening to the housekeeper, then beckoned for Nancy to follow him.

After he had hung up his coat and hat in the hall closet, he led the way into the living room. The two sat down.

“You have news?” Nancy queried.

“Yes. It’s a mystery to me. Maybe you can figure it out. I had a cable late this afternoon from Mr. Bates-Jones.”

The lawyer hesitated and Nancy sensed that what he was about to say was not going to please her. Finally he told her.

“You and I have been discharged,” he said.

“Discharged from what?” Nancy asked.

“The Nancy Smith Drew Case.”

“You mean they’ve found her?” Nancy cried, astonished.

Mr. Drew shook his head. “That’s the mystery. The cable said someone else was putting them in touch with Nancy Smith Drew and that you and I could give up the case.”

Nancy was amazed. “That’s all the cable said?”

“Yes.”

"Well, I think it's pretty abrupt when you have been so nice to make overseas phone calls to him."

Mr. Drew smiled. "Cables cost money. Perhaps Mr. Bates-Jones will follow his message with a letter of explanation."

Nancy thought this over. Intuition told her that there was something quite unnatural about the whole thing.

"What's on your mind?" her father asked.

"Well, I think something phony is going on."

"You mean the cable?" her father asked.

"No. But I just have a strong hunch that there might be a fake Nancy Smith Drew posing as the real one."

The matter was discussed later with Hannah Gruen, who was inclined to agree with Nancy. "Call it woman's intuition if you like," she said. "If I were you, I wouldn't let it drop here."

"Perhaps you're right," Mr. Drew said. "I'll telephone to Mr. Bates-Jones in the morning and see if he will give me more details."

"May I be there when you make the call?" Nancy asked.

The lawyer smiled. "I'll make it from here before I leave for my office. I'd like you to hear what's said."

Directly after breakfast the following morning Mr. Drew put in the call to London. He had to wait several minutes before being connected with the lawyer there. Mr. Drew explained that he and Nancy did not want to go against Mr. Bates-Jones's wishes, but were calling to find out if the real Nancy Smith Drew had been located.

"We have some good leads to her ourselves," Nancy's father said, "so your cable was a great surprise."

Nancy, who was seated near the phone, could hear the answer plainly.

"We appreciate your great interest and all the trouble you have gone to," Mr. Bates-Jones said, "but we have had a communication from an American detective agency that for a fee they will tell us the secret whereabouts of the heiress."

Mr. Drew frowned. "But how did they learn you're looking for her?"

"That we don't know, but we have no reason to believe the firm is not telling the truth."

"Perhaps I could be of help to you," Mr. Drew said, "by looking up this agency. It's just possible that a thorough investigation might be to

your advantage."

There was a long pause. "Well," the London lawyer finally said, "I think it best not to divulge the name."

Nancy and her father looked at each other. This certainly was a brush-off!

Before saying good-by, Mr. Drew added, "Frankly, Mr. Bates-Jones, my daughter and I are very suspicious about this. I advise you not to part with any money until the whole thing has been thoroughly investigated."

There was a loud exclamation at the other end of the wire. Finally the London attorney said, "Thank you for your advice, Mr. Drew. I will talk to my partner about the case and let you know the result."

When the conversation had ended, Mr. Drew said he must hurry off. After he had gone, Nancy settled down in a big chair to think. Intuition told her she must not give up the case. Yet what else could she do?

Suddenly she remembered something and thought, "I still have another case—Edgar Nixon and the money stolen from Dad's registered letter, I can work on that."

CHAPTER IX

"He's Not a Suspect!"

THE ringing of the telephone brought Nancy out of her meditation. The caller was Ira Nixon. He sounded very weak.

"Is something the matter?" Nancy asked quickly, fearful that the mail carrier had taken a turn for the worse.

"Will you please come over right away?" the old man asked.

Nancy promised to leave immediately. She went to the kitchen to tell Mrs. Gruen where she was going.

"I hope he isn't worse," the housekeeper said. "The poor fellow's probably starved. Nancy, I want you to take him a jar of the fresh vegetable soup I prepared for tonight's dinner."

"I'll be happy to," Nancy said.

Hannah ladled some of the soup into a jar. She then put it in a paper bag, but before handing the package to Nancy, she said, "And don't forget to take that old shoe out of here."

Nancy laughed. "It's going to police headquarters as fast as I can get it there. But I must go to Ira's first."

Fifteen minutes later she arrived at Ira Nixon's little white house. The front door was unlocked and she let herself in. The mail carrier, haggard and worried-looking, sat in a rocker near the fireplace. He explained that he had had a chill and one of his neighbors had come in to build a fire.

"Everybody is so kind to me except—except my brother. He gives me orders every time he comes here."

Nancy sat down. "Did he come to get money from you?"

Ira Nixon shook his head. "Not this time," he said. "And that's why I sent for you. Here's what happened.

"Edgar came here about an hour ago. As soon as he'd gone I tried to get you on the phone but it was busy. My brother was all dressed up

as usual and he has a new car. It's red."

Nancy made no comment about the new car, but she was thinking hard. "Yes?" she urged Mr. Nixon, who had stopped speaking. "Go on."

"Nancy, that boy had nothing to do with my hard luck, I'm sure of that now." The postman continued. "He said he came here as soon as he heard about the mail robbery. He was as sympathetic as you are. Wanted me to give him some. of my inheritance to hire a private detective and clear up the whole matter."

"Have you received all of your inheritance?" Nancy asked.

"Not a cent. I told him that."

Ira Nixon went on to say that Edgar had tried to talk him into handing over any money he had on hand. "He said he would take care of all the details of hiring a detective, but some cash would help a lot."

Nancy had her own idea of just how much detective hiring Ira would have received for the money, but she said nothing.

"So you see," Ira continued, "you were all wrong about Edgar. He's not a suspect. He knew nothing about the stolen mail. He's too dictatorial to suit me, but I certainly can't say he's a thief."

Nancy made no comment but asked, "Did your brother happen to say where he's staying?"

"Oh yes. There's no secret about that," Mr. Nixon went on. "He's boarding up in Ridgefield. He even gave me his address. I have it written down here. Wait a minute—

"Here it is!" Ira took a slip of paper from the pocket of his bathrobe. "He boards with a family named Hemmer on Harrison Street."

Nancy got up to leave. "By the way, did your brother ever mention a girl friend?"

"Not until today," the old man replied. "Edgar said he's going to marry a rich girl very soon."

"What's her name?"

"He didn't say."

Nancy wondered if it could be the English Nancy Drew. In any case, she decided to go to Ridgefield right away and see what she could find out. Before leaving, Nancy asked if Edgar Nixon were employed.

His brother shrugged. "We never discussed his affairs. He was always well dressed and had a car, so I guess he made a good living."

Further suspicion ran through Nancy's mind. It seemed most unnatural for a brother to be so uncommunicative. It was just possible that Edgar's way of earning a living was too shady for him to reveal.

After saying good-by to Ira Nixon, Nancy drove directly to police headquarters and asked to see Chief McGinnis. She was told to go right into his office.

"Hello, Nancy," he said. "You've been neglecting us lately." He grinned and added, "I thought you'd have the mystery of the missing mail solved by this time."

"Here's one of the clues," said Nancy

"Not quite yet," Nancy replied. "But I do have some interesting clues. Here's one of them," she said, handing over the worn shoe to Chief McGinnis.

Nancy went on to bring the chief up to date about all the information she had on the suspect.

"I'm going to drive up to Ridgefield and do a little investigating," she said. "If I turn up any valuable clues, shall I get in touch with you or the Ridgefield police?"

"You'd better tell the chief up there."

Directly after lunch Nancy phoned Bess and George and asked if they could drive over to Ridgefield with her. George said at once she would not miss it for anything.

"Is this a dangerous assignment?" Bess queried.

Nancy laughed. "I haven't heard yet that Edgar Nixon gets rough, but then you never can tell."

At once Bess knew she was being teased. "I'm not chicken. When do you want me to be ready?"

"In half an hour. Okay?"

"I guess I could put on some lipstick and powder and get my hair combed by that time," Bess replied.

Before leaving, Nancy called her father to see if any further word had come from England. She was told No.

"I guess we'll just have to wait for a letter," the lawyer said.

Nancy then told him of her proposed trip to Ridgefield and the new clues she had picked up.

"Good for you," her father said. "Well, I hope the next time I talk to my daughter, she'll have lots of good news for me."

"I'll try hard."

A few minutes later Nancy set off. She picked up George first and then went on to the Marvin home. Bess was not waiting for her in front of the house so Nancy honked the horn. Her friend did not appear.

A look of disgust came over George's face. "That cousin of mine never watches the clock. She's probably writing letters and making phone calls and doing a lot of things and here we are waiting."

Nancy tooted again. When Bess still did not come outside, she got

out of the car and went to the front door.

At that instant Bess opened it. She apologized for being late and said she had just finished talking to Dave Evans, who had called her from Emerson.

"I have something interesting to tell you, Nancy," she said. "Ned tried to phone you but you'd already left the house. I'm glad Dave caught me."

"What is the big news?" Nancy asked, trying not to be impatient.

Bess explained that the young woman who was coaching the Shakespearean play and was known as N. Smith Drew was indeed Nancy Smith Drew.

"How marvelous!" Nancy exclaimed.

"There's more to it," Bess went on.

As the two girls reached Nancy's convertible, she related the first part of the message to George. Then she added, "Nancy Smith Drew has gone to Ridgefield!"

"Ridgefield?" Nancy cried out.

The three girls stared at one another, the same thought Hashing through their minds. Was it merely coincidence that the actress and Edgar Nixon had gone to Ridgefield at the same time? Or had she perhaps been drawn into some kind of racket with the suspect?

Bess exclaimed, "Wouldn't that be awful!"

George expressed a further thought. "Maybe Miss Drew found out he stole the letter from England and went to Ridgefield to get it."

Bess looked puzzled. "Are you trying to say Edgar plans to keep her from learning about the inheritance?"

"Could be," George answered. "I wouldn't put anything past that man."

Nancy nodded. All the suspicions she had had about Edgar Nixon now came back to her.

"Of course all this doesn't explain the money sent to Dad which was stolen," she said.

"Edgar's a slick one," George remarked.

Nancy was worried. "Girls, I'm afraid that he intends to marry Nancy Smith Drew, perhaps in Ridgefield, and enjoy the inheritance that is coming to her."

"How despicable!" Bess cried. "And Miss Drew, I'm sure, is too nice

a person to be tied to a dishonest husband."

George grinned. "In any case, we'd better get to Ridgefield as fast as we can and stop the wedding!"

CHAPTER X

Search for a Bride

"IT's starting to snow," Bess remarked as a few flakes hit the windshield of Nancy's convertible.

Before leaving home, she had put the top up because the day was cloudy and raw, with a hint of stormy weather.

Bess went on, "Oh, I hope it won't be bad. Nancy, does this car have snow tires?"

Before Nancy could reply, George spoke up. "Bess, you have so little faith in people. Of course Nancy would have snow tires and good ones at that."

Her cousin defended herself quickly. "After working with Nancy on all the mysteries she's asked us to help her solve, you know even the smartest people can be forgetful sometimes!"

Nancy laughed. "You girls have driven with me in snowstorms many times. Nevertheless I promise to be careful. Oh, it's getting to be worse fast."

Due to the storm, it took longer to get to Ridgefield than Nancy had hoped, but she was buoyed up by an exciting thought. Soon she would either come face to face with Edgar Nixon or find out whether or not he was married.

When the girls arrived on the outskirts of Ridgefield, the snow was deep. Nancy asked directions to Harrison Street. She found it blocked off by a snow removal machine which had stalled.

Nancy turned down a hill and parked near the foot of it. The three girls climbed back up, turned right on Harrison Street, and trudged along the unshoveled sidewalk.

Finally they came to Mrs. Hemmer's guesthouse. By this time the girls were covered with snow. Before stepping onto the porch, they brushed off what snow they could and stamped their boots.

Nancy rang the bell. In a minute it was answered by a plain-looking

woman in her sixties. She looked surprised to see the three callers.

"What can I do for you?" she asked. "You lost or just cold?"

The girls smiled and Nancy replied, "We're all right. We had to park on the next street so we got covered with snow walking up here. Is Mr. Edgar Nixon at home?"

"Why—uh—no," Mrs. Hemmer answered. "What do you want to see him about?"

"When will he be back?" Nancy replied, deliberately evading the woman's question. Mrs. Hemmer surveyed her callers from head to toe before saying, "You look like nice honest young ladies. The answer is that Edgar Nixon moved out this morning."

"Oh!" the three girls chorused.

"Did you know ahead of time he was going?" Nancy queried.

"No, I didn't," the woman said. "He never hinted at such a thing. As a matter of fact, he seemed quite happy here. But then, I suppose when you inherit money you want to move to better quarters."

The girls tried not to show their excitement at this statement. Nancy said nonchalantly, "So Edgar inherited some money?"

Mrs. Hemmer became more talkative. "It's kind of cold for me standin' here. Won't you come inside?"

Nancy and her friends followed the woman. She led them to her living room, which was cheerful despite the dull day.

"Mr. Nixon didn't say where the money was coming from," Mrs. Hemmer went on, "but he told me it was a big sum and now he was going to change his type of work."

"What sort of work did he do?" George asked.

"That I don't know," the woman replied. "Mr. Nixon was kind of mysterious about his affairs, but I suspect he was in some mail-order business. He received lots of letters."

Nancy could see her excellent clue fast petering out. No doubt Edgar would have notified the post office already of his change of address. Finally Nancy asked the question that was uppermost in her mind.

"Did Edgar Nixon say he was going to be married, Mrs. Hemmer?"

"Not this morning he didn't," the woman said. "But he mentioned it yesterday."

"I suppose he was pretty excited about it," Nancy remarked, trying hard not to show her rising excitement. "Who's the young lady?"

Mrs. Hemmer said he had not mentioned her name. “But I suppose she was the one who came here this morning.”

The three girls looked at one another. Before they had a chance to ask anything about her, Mrs. Hemmer went on, “To tell you the truth, I don’t think it was very polite of Mr. Nixon not to introduce her to me. I went to the door and let her in. He came rushing down the stairs with his two suitcases and said, ‘Let’s go!’ ”

Nancy heaved a sigh, but tried not to reveal her great disappointment. “I’m sure she’s the person we’re trying to find. Too bad you didn’t learn her name. Can you tell us anything about her?”

“I didn’t pay particular attention,” Mrs. Hemmer answered. “She was tall and all bundled up in fur. I did notice, though, that she spoke with a British accent.”

Now there was no doubt in Nancy’s mind that the person who had come to the house was Nancy Smith Drew. Her heart sank as she thought that by this time she and Edgar Nixon might be husband and wife.

“We must go,” Nancy said. “Thank you for all the time you’ve given us.” She smiled. “Don’t be surprised if we come back and call on you again.”

“Glad to see you any time,” the woman told her.

As the girls trudged up the snowy street, Bess said, “Do you plan to do any more sleuthing in Ridgefield?”

“I’m going to the Town Hall and see if Edgar Nixon took out a marriage license,” Nancy told her.

Through inquiries she learned that the building was not far away, so the girls decided to walk there. They were told that no marriage license had been issued to the couple.

“They could have been married almost any place,” Bess spoke up. “Trying to get that information would be like hunting for a needle in a haystack.”

Nancy turned back to the clerk and said, “Do you have a justice of the peace in this town?”

“Yes we do. He has an office on the second floor.”

Nancy thanked the clerk and motioned for the girls to follow her up the stairs. The justice of the peace was a short, rotund man with a jolly look. He seemed amused by Nancy’s inquiry. She guessed that he was thinking, “This girl’s disappointed about losing her fiancé and is trying to find out about his elopement with someone else!”

“I haven’t married anybody for a month,” the justice of the peace said, “and never anyone named Edgar Nixon or Nancy Drew.”

He suggested that one of the clergymen in town might have performed the ceremony. “Suppose I give you a list,” he said, “and you can go around and find out for yourself.”

He opened a drawer and pulled out a pad. In a few moments he had written out a rather long list.

“I appreciate this,” Nancy said. “Because of the storm I don’t think I’ll try visiting all these people.”

The justice of the peace told her there was a pay telephone booth in the main lobby of the building. “You’ll keep drier if you try calling up, instead of going out in the snow.”

Nancy agreed, thanked the man for his help, and went downstairs with the girls. They pooled their coins and took turns dialing the names on the list. Fortunately all the men were at home, but said that they had not performed any marriage ceremony for a couple of weeks. Furthermore, they had had no requests for any during the next week.

When Nancy completed the last call, Bess remarked, “Nancy, you look pretty downcast. This trip in the snow is all for nothing.”

George tried to cheer up her friend. “I have a suggestion. Why don’t we go back to Mrs. Hemmer’s and ask if she would mind our looking for clues in Edgar’s room?”

Nancy thought it was an excellent idea and once more the girls plowed through the snowy streets to the guesthouse.

“You’re back?” the woman remarked. “Wouldn’ t your car start?”

“To tell the truth, I haven’t tried it,” Nancy answered. “Mrs. Hemmer, it’s very important that I locate Edgar Nixon as soon as possible. We girls thought possibly he left some clue to his whereabouts in his room.”

“I don’t mind you looking around one bit,” the woman said. “As a matter of fact, I’m very glad you came back. Several registered letters came in for Mr. Nixon right after you left. Out of force of habit I signed for them. After the mail carrier left, I realize that I didn’t know where to send the letters. Then I suddenly remembered something. Did you tell me before that your name is Nancy Drew and that you come from River Heights?”

“That’s right.”

“Did you ever hear of a man named Ira Nixon who lives there?”

Nancy smiled. “He’s our mail carrier. As a matter of fact he’s a brother of Edgar.”

“I know that,” Mrs. Hemmer said. “Maybe you could help me out with these letters. Some time ago Mr. Nixon said to me, ‘In case of an emergency, get in touch with my brother Ira in River Heights.’ ”

The three girls were watching Mrs. Hemmer intently. What would she reveal next?

The woman went on, “If you could just prove to me that you’re Nancy Drew from River Heights I’d give you these letters to take to his brother.”

Nancy showed her driver’s license, but said, “Suppose I give you Ira Nixon’s telephone number, you can dial it and tell him I’m here.”

The woman asked Nancy to make the call and she would talk with Ira Nixon. After a short delay Ira Nixon came on the line. Nancy identified herself, told where she was, and introduced Mrs. Hemmer.

“You take it now,” she said, handing the woman the phone.

Mrs. Hemmer told him the story and he verified the fact that Nancy was really Nancy Drew from River Heights and that he had known her since she was a little girl.

“Your brother Edgar has moved away from here,” she said. “He told me that in an emergency I should get in touch with you. I think these letters should be turned over to you. Shall I give them to Nancy Drew?”

“By all means,” the girls heard him reply. “Nancy Drew is one of the most reliable persons I’ve ever met and she’s trying to help me solve a mystery. Mrs. Hemmer,” he asked suddenly, “you never had any reason to think my brother isn’t perfectly honest?”

“Oh no,” the woman answered. “He always paid his rent on time and came and went without any trouble to me. Of course he never told me much about himself, but then it’s just as well not to have too much talk between a guesthouse owner and her roomers.”

The bundle of letters proved to be too big for Nancy’s purse or even coat pocket. Since it had stopped snowing, she decided it would be all right for her to carry them in her hand as far as the car.

Before leaving, the three girls searched Edgar’s room but found no clues to where he had gone. Finally they said good-by to Mrs. Hemmer and hurried down Harrison Street. When they reached the street on which the convertible was parked, Bess suggested it would be easier to walk down the hill in the middle of the street rather than on the

sidewalk.

They had hardly started when a boy on a sled whizzed around the comer. The next second he skidded into Nancy.

The impact knocked her sprawling into the snow. The bundle of letters flew from her hand and scattered in every direction.

CHAPTER XI

The Strange Messages

BESS and George rushed to Nancy's aid. They helped her up and asked solicitously if she were hurt.

Nancy smiled ruefully. "Mostly my feelings," she said with a wry smile. "My leg does hurt a little, though. I'd like to sit down."

The girls assisted her to the porch of a house where the steps had been cleared of snow. Nancy sat down and rubbed the bruise on her leg.

Bess and George looked at each other. Nancy was very white and they kept asking her over and over again how she really felt and should they take her to a doctor.

"Oh no!" she replied. "I'll be all right in a minute. You girls had better go pick up those letters. They're getting soaked in the snow."

As the cousins started for the street, several children on sleds came speeding down the hill.

They ran over the letters, burying them deeper and mutilating them. Bess and George hurried to pick them up.

The girls returned to the porch and Nancy stared at the letters in dismay. Some of them were open, others were torn and two had the contents sticking out.

"Oh look!" George exclaimed. "This letter has money in it. Wow! Twenty-five dollars!"

She handed the envelope to Nancy, who immediately looked for a return address. There was none. "Maybe there's one on the letter inside," she suggested.

"I'm going to look and see," Bess declared, and began to read the already-opened letter. In a moment a broad grin spread across her face. "Listen to this:

'Dear Guide,

I am so excited at the thought that I am soon to meet the man of my dreams. I can hardly work. Please don't keep me waiting.

Mildred' "

Now Bess's amusement turned to a serious mood. "We might be all wrong about Nancy Smith Drew," she said. "Maybe Edgar is going to marry this person Mildred."

"Is there an address on the letter?" Nancy asked.

"No."

George remarked, "What puzzles me is why twenty-five dollars is in the letter. Pretty soft, if Edgar can get twenty-five dollars out of his future bride!"

"Where was the letter mailed?" Nancy asked.

"Dorset."

Bess looked at Nancy. "You think maybe Edgar went to Dorset to marry Mildred?"

Nancy smiled. "Perhaps. Are there any more open letters with money in them?"

George looked through the dirty, rumpled mail. "Yes, here's another. And there's twenty-five dollars in it!"

Nancy asked her to read the letter, saying, "I'm beginning to be suspicious of something. I'll tell you in a minute."

" 'Dear Guide:

I am so thrilled! It won't be long before I'll be in the arms of the man fate has sent met

I am counting the hours!

Martha' "

There was no return address on either the letter or the envelope.

"What is your suspicion, Nancy?" Bess asked. "That Edgar Nixon is a bigamist—or even a trigamist?"

"More likely," George put in, "he promises, for sums of money, to marry a whole bunch of women, and when things get too hot, he just skips out. This time, with Nancy learning too much about him, he had to leave before he had a chance to pick up the last bunch of letters. I'll bet there's twenty-five dollars in every one of these!"

"Shall we find out?" Bess asked eagerly.

Nancy shook her head. "To read an open or half-open letter is one

thing. But to open the whole thing and snoop inside is illegal."

"Nancy, you haven't told us your theory yet," George reminded her.

The girl detective laughed. She said teasingly, "I haven't had a chance! I suspect that Edgar Nixon has been running a Lonely Hearts Club and gets money for promising to find a husband, or a wife, for the person who is foolish enough to put his or her trust in Edgar."

George snorted. "Do you think the silly people believe they are going to get a mate for twenty-five dollars?"

"Oh no," Nancy replied. "I would judge that the whole thing is done on an installment plan. These two letters which we have read are probably the last installment."

"So that's why Edgar had to skip out!" Bess suggested, and Nancy nodded.

"The scheme is positively revolting!" George exclaimed.

"And more than that," Bess said, "it's heart-breaking. A Lonely Hearts Club turned into a Hopeless Hearts Club."

George had several uncomplimentary things to say about Edgar Nixon. Then suddenly she paused in the middle of a sentence. Her eyes flashed. "Do you suppose Nancy Smith Drew is one of Edgar's victims?"

Bess said, "If she is, and he didn't intend to marry her, why did Edgar let her come here?"

Nancy looked thoughtful. "I still think he intends to marry her. He knows about the inheritance, but she doesn't, and he isn't going to let her find out until after they're married. Then, through some clever scheme, he plans to get the money away from her."

"We mustn't let him do that!" Bess cried.

George looked hard at her cousin. "And just how can we stop him? We don't know where he is. Miss Drew came here and went away with him and—"

"And what else?" Bess asked her, a bit miffed by George's gruffness.

Her cousin did not answer, but said, "Nancy, what do you intend to do with these letters? Are you still going to take them to Ira Nixon?"

Nancy shook her head. "I don't think that would be wise. In the first place, the poor old man would probably collapse again. I'd hate to be responsible for that. If his brother is a swindler, I feel that the authorities should inform Ira, not me."

The other girls agreed.

“I think we should go at once to the postmaster here and explain everything.”

“Will you tell him your suspicions about the Lonely Hearts Club?” Bess questioned.

“I think I will,” Nancy answered. “Even if I’m wrong, it won’t hurt for the post office to make an investigation. Men don’t just disappear without leaving any forwarding address unless they have something to hide.”

Nancy declared that she felt much better now. She got up and trudged down the hill with the girls to her car. She inquired from some children where the post office was and drove directly there. Unfortunately the building was closed.

“Now what?” George asked. “Don’t tell me we have to stay in this town all night!”

Bess grinned. “I’m sure Mrs. Hemmer would be glad to accommodate us in Edgar’s vacated room.”

The other girls laughed, then Nancy replied, “Since the letters were entrusted to my care, I’ll take them home and tomorrow morning take them to the River Heights post office.”

It was late by the time the girls reached River Heights. Nancy took her friends home, then started for her own house. She was eager to tell her father and Hannah Gruen the latest developments in the mystery.

Nancy was mulling over the case as she turned into the Drews’ driveway. One thing was a complete puzzle—the part about the American detective agency getting in touch with Malmsbury and Bates-Jones in London.

She put the car away and walked slowly toward the kitchen door. Just before she reached it, a startling idea came to her. Could Edgar Nixon, to throw suspicion from himself, have gone to a shady detective agency and said he knew where the missing Nancy Smith Drew was? He could have asked them to contact Malmsbury and Bates-Jones. Then his own unsavory schemes would never be suspected.

CHAPTER XII

A Fresh Puzzle

MR. DREW was waiting for Nancy in the kitchen and she thought she detected relief in his expression.

"Dad, were you worried about me?"

"I certainly was. The storm didn't hit us very much, but I heard on the radio it was heavy over in Ridgefield."

"It was, and this accounts for a few adventures I had," she said.

Hannah Gruen, vigorously whipping potatoes in a pot, turned with questioning eyes. "Were you in an accident with the car? Did you get hurt?"

"Only a little accident, but not with the car. I have a few bruises on one leg where a boy on a sled ran into me. Don't worry," she added, as the housekeeper stopped her dinner preparations and came over to examine the injury.

"If it hadn't been for the sled, the letters wouldn't have opened and we wouldn't have found the money in them nor known that Edgar Nixon is probably running a Lonely Hearts Club—"

Mr. Drew held up his hand to interrupt. "For Pete's sake, Nancy," he said, "please take off your heavy clothes and we'll sit down at the table. Then you can tell your story from beginning to end. It sounds interesting."

Mrs. Gruen had prepared a delicious roast beef dinner, which they all enjoyed. During the meal, Nancy told about her adventures. The others were amazed and agreed that no doubt her conclusions about Edgar Nixon were correct.

Mr. Drew approved the idea of the letters being taken to their local postal inspector first thing in the morning. "But you'll have to tell Ira. Suppose you say how the letters got damaged and you thought the post office should have them."

"All right, Dad. That should satisfy him. I certainly don't want to

hurt poor Ira at this time."

Nancy asked her father if any further word had come from Mr. Bates-Jones in London. Her father shook his head.

"In a way," Mr. Drew added, "I'm glad there is no news. Tomorrow you and Bess and George go to Emerson, don't you?"

"Yes, Dad. I expect it will be an exciting weekend."

"Well, I want you to enjoy it and not have the mystery on your mind. There is something in the evening paper that I think will interest you," Mr. Drew added as they all rose from the table.

He went to get the newspaper and turned to the sports section. He pointed out a headline, which made Nancy's heart skip a beat. It said:

EMERSON COUNTS ON NICKERSON TOE

The article went on to tell of Ned's prowess at punting and kicking field goals. Nancy felt very proud to be his guest.

"It ought to be a great game," Mr. Drew remarked. "Wish I could be there, but you'll have to tell me all about it Monday."

The lawyer went for his coat and said he was going out to bowl with some friends. After he had gone, Nancy started to help Hannah tidy the dining room and kitchen, but the housekeeper urged her to go upstairs and pack.

"There's not much to do here," she told Nancy. "You'll have to get up early if you're going to stop at the post office, and then pick up George and Bess. It's a long drive to Emerson and you'll want time to change your clothes before the play. It's tomorrow night, isn't it?"

"Yes, and I hope to meet Nancy Smith Drew face to face. You know, Hannah, it is just possible that Edgar Nixon may have gone to Emerson with her. Oh, I only hope that they won't be married before they get there and I can try to prevent the wedding."

Nancy had just started her packing when she heard the doorbell ring. In a few seconds she became aware that the housekeeper was arguing with someone. Then Hannah Gruen climbed the stairs and poked her head into the doorway of Nancy's room.

"It's that pest again," she said with a sigh. "I told her to go away, because you were very busy, but she's insistent and won't budge until she has seen you."

Nancy smiled. "You mean Mrs. Skeets?"

"Yes. What will I tell her?"

"I guess I'd better talk to her," Nancy said. "You may never get rid

of her if I don't find out what she wants."

Nancy walked down to the front hall where Mrs. Skeets was standing. The woman was well bundled up, but her stringy hair showed below her hat.

"I knew you'd see me," she crowed as Nancy appeared.

"What can I do for you?" Nancy queried.

"As I told you once before, I don't want nothin' except what's mine," Mrs. Skeets said.

Nancy suspected the woman was going to ask for additional money and said quickly, "Don't expect anything more from me."

"Now, young lady," Mrs. Skeets retorted, shaking a finger at Nancy, "don't get uppity with me or you may regret it. I came here on an errand of good will, I want you to know. But if you don't show proper respect for your elders—and what young folks do these days, I ask you—I'll go away and you'll never learn why I came."

Nancy was amused by this tirade, but also curious to know what the errand of good will was.

"I'm listening."

"Well, that's good. Most o' the girls today won't listen to their elders. Nope, I'd say the chicks seem to think they can teach the old birds to fly." Mrs. Skeets laughed loudly at her own joke. "As I've said more than once to Mrs. Brant next door, who has eight young uns, 'Mrs. Brant, I said—' "

Nancy interrupted. "Please tell me why you really came here. I am very busy upstairs."

Mrs. Skeets frowned in an annoyed way, then said, "Well, I came to tell you all the missin' letters was mailed back to their owners."

Nancy was so surprised she stepped backward. The idea of such a thing happening after all this time left her speechless for the moment.

"Ah-ha, I thought that would knock you overt" Mrs. Skeets exclaimed. "Now maybe you'll listen to me."

Nancy realized that the letters stolen from the Drews had not been returned. She said, "How do you know all the letters were mailed back to the people?"

" 'Cause I went around and asked everybody in the neighborhood. It all started this way. We got a new mail carrier. This mornin' he came to our door and handed me three letters. The first one I looked at was the electric bill, which was away too high. We're folks for early

sleepin', and I never ran no eight dollars' worth of electric last month and the company is goin' to hear from me, you can bet."

Nancy repressed a smile as Mrs. Skeets went on, "The next letter wasn't a letter at all, but a postcard from an old neighbor of mine in New York, only she lives in Florida now.

"She bought a house down there several years ago. Looked good then but it's fallin' apart, and ain't worth half what she paid for it. But she hasn't any money, so she lives in it, and she says what the rich people find in Florida she can't—"

"Oh, Mrs. Skeets, please," Nancy cried in exasperation. "What has all this to do with your being here to see me?"

"I'm comin' to that," Mrs. Skeets said. "Just give me time. As I was sayin'—where was I now? See, you made me forget!

"Oh yes. The other letter, mind you, was from Joe's sister. And I knew right well she wouldn't write twice a week even if someone held her hand to guide the pen. And there was the ten dollars in the letter too, and she wouldn't send me twenty dollars in one week any more'n she'd send me a million. So I got an idea and looked at the postmark. Sure enough, just as I suspected, it was stamped twice by the post office here!"

"This will make Ira Nixon very happy," Nancy remarked.

The woman pulled ten dollars from her pooket. "I suppose I owe you an apology, but anyhow here's your ten dollars."

"Thank you very much," said Nancy. "I'm relieved the whole matter is straightened out."

She was glad Mrs. Skeets had not asked her whether the Drew mail had also been returned. It would only have led to another long speech.

The sailor's wife put her hand on the doorknob, but before turning it, she looked straight at Nancy and with a smirk said, "I guess you've had your fun."

"What do you mean?" Nancy demanded.

Mrs. Skeets gave a raucous laugh. "Oh, I can see how two or three young girls in this day and age might think it funny to steal a poor old mail carrier's letters and hide the whole lot of 'em from the rightful owners for a day or two. I'm not so blind I can't see through a knothole."

Nancy was furious. "Mrs. Skeets, you have no right to insinuate such a thing. Neither I nor my friends would be guilty of such a low trick!

And the post office wouldn't think it was any joke. We'd be liable."

"Maybe so, maybe so," said Mrs. Skeets. She opened the front door with a flourish and stepped onto the porch. "I can't help havin' my thoughts, though. But I won't say anything. Don't think I'm a gossip. Good-by!" She went down the front steps.

By this time Hannah Gruen had joined Nancy. As the suspicious woman walked out of sight down the driveway, the housekeeper remarked:

"Imagine having to live with such a person! I don't blame Sailor Joe for taking long voyages to get away from her!"

Nancy burst into laughter, then reminded Mrs. Gruen that the Drews' letters had not been returned.

"I suspect that the thief had planned to steal only our mail but didn't have much time and so he took everything. He couldn't guess there was money in Mrs. Skeets's letter and he wasn't interested in the contents of any others except ours."

Mrs. Gruen nodded. "This directly involves you in the case. Well, honey, you'd better get back to your packing."

Nancy had just finished when Mr. Drew returned. He laughed heartily at her story of Mrs. Skeets and then said he thought Nancy's theories about the stolen letters were correct.

"This seems to pinpoint the fact that the mail thief, who is probably Edgar Nixon, was after the letter to my client which had a large sum of money in it. Whether or not he knew about the message for Nancy Smith Drew is something still to be cleared up."

By eight o'clock the following morning Nancy was ready to leave the house. She had all the letters for Edgar Nixon in a large envelope of her father's and went with them directly to the postal inspector, Mr. Wernick, who was already at work. He was delighted to hear that most of the mail taken from Ira Nixon had been returned.

"But we have no lead to the guilty person," he told her. "Even that shoe your little friend Tommy gave you must belong to someone else. Shoe prints of Edgar Nixon at Ira's house don't match."

"Too bad," said Nancy.

She told about the letters coming to Edgar Nixon and her suspicions regarding them. When she showed Mr. Wernick the two she had read, he stared in amazement.

"This is very serious," the postal inspector said. "I'll run the rest through our X-ray machine and see if there's money in them."

CHAPTER XIII

Locked In

"How long will it take to X-ray the letters?" Nancy asked the postal inspector.

Mr. Wernick smiled at her. "You're thinking you won't have time to wait? You'd better. I have a hunch there are going to be some surprises in those letters and I'm sure you'll want to know what they are. It won't take long."

He summoned one of the technicians on duty and gave him the assignment. "We suspect there's money inside each of these," he said.

The man was gone only a few minutes. He came back with the X rays as well as the letters. "I'd say there are bills in every envelope. Probably twenty-five dollars in each," he reported.

Nancy was elated and waited for the postal inspector to comment. He said, "I think your idea of a Lonely Hearts Club and money coming in installments is a good one. We'll work on the case from this new angle. And, of course," he added with a twinkle in his eye, "we'll expect all the help we can get from you."

Nancy promised it and said she hoped that before the weekend was over she might have startling news for him. She did not divulge what it was and soon said good-by.

"Oh, the evidence is closing in on Edgar Nixon," she thought. "Now if I can only keep Nancy Smith Drew from marrying him, everything will be wonderful."

She picked up Bess and George, and as they rode toward Emerson, she told about the information she had received at the post office.

The cousins were excited to hear this, but presently Bess said, "Between now and the time that you see Nancy Smith Drew at the play, let's talk about something besides the mysteries. I'd hate to meet Dave with my mind full of clues and crooks."

George could not resist a gibe at her cousin. "That's better than

nothing."

Bess made a face and changed the subject. "There's a quaint-looking tearoom ahead. Let's stop there for lunch. It's been a long time since breakfast."

The others agreed, but Nancy said they must not spend too much time. They ate quickly and two hours later the towers of Emerson College came into view. Nancy drove directly to the Omega Chi Epsilon House, where the girls' dates were on hand to give them a warm welcome.

Ned was tall, handsome, and athletic-looking, with wavy dark hair, a ready smile, and brown eyes.

"I'm glad you made good time," he said, "because I want you to tell us all about this mystery business."

Dave Evans was blond, green-eyed, and of rangy build. He gazed at Bess fondly. "You look stunning in that new suit," he remarked. "I like that fur collar. What is it—squirrel?"

George spoke up. "Yep. She shot it on the way up here."

Bess withered her cousin with a look. "As a matter of fact it's mink."

"How's the play coming?" Nancy asked Burt Eddleton, a short, blond, husky young man.

He shook his head sadly. "Miss Drew hasn't returned yet. I don't know any more about coaching a Shakespearean play than I do about guiding a rocket to the moon. The whole thing's going to be a complete flop."

Nancy was sorry to hear that the actress had not returned yet. She said she had hoped to see Miss Drew for a short time before the afternoon was over.

A short time later Burt announced that he and Dave would have to leave for a rehearsal.

"See you after the show," Dave called as the two boys hurried off.

That evening Ned escorted Nancy, Bess, and George to the college theater, which was attached to the large gymnasium. After the audience was seated, one of the students in the drama group stepped in front of the curtain and said he wished to make an announcement.

"I know all of you are expecting to see a performance of a Shakespearean play. As you have read, the club engaged the services of Miss Smith Drew, a drama coach. Unfortunately she had a sudden errand out of town and has not returned."

Nancy's heart sank. The heiress must have married Edgar Nixon!

The announcer went on, "Late this afternoon, we fellows decided that it would be impossible to put on the play we had planned, so we have substituted a comedy. It is called the *The Mix-up*. We have been rehearsing this for some time, planning to present it in the spring. You won't find it so polished as we had hoped, but we trust you'll enjoy it."

The good-natured audience clapped enthusiastically. The announcer stepped into the wings and the curtain opened. The play was well named and the audience laughed uproariously. The star of the show proved to be Dave. He was so extremely funny, alternately playing a girl and her twin brother, that the audience broke into repeated applause.

The Mix-up was such a success that Nancy temporarily forgot her mysteries. But she was soon to be reminded of them. As she was walking out of the auditorium, one of Ned's friends spotted her. He called out gaily, "Hi, Nancy Drew!"

At once an attractive young woman, walking just ahead of Nancy, turned around and stopped. She smiled at the girl.

"You're Nancy Drew?"

When Nancy nodded, she went on, "For a moment I thought you might be another Nancy Drew whom I know. As a matter of fact, I thought I saw her here tonight but she left before I could speak to her."

Nancy was excited about this news. "What is this other Nancy Drew's full name?"

"Nancy Smith Drew."

"Did she ever work for your family?" Nancy queried.

"Yes, she did. She was a governess for my brother and me for a few years. She left to become an actress."

Nancy looked at the young woman. "Are you, by any chance, Miss Wilson?"

"Yes, I am."

Nancy explained how she had telephoned to the Wilson home and left a message that if her mother ever heard from Nancy Smith Drew, she was to tell her that an inheritance awaited her in England.

"Oh, how marvelous!" Miss Wilson exclaimed. "I've been away at school and my parents didn't pass along the message."

“You said you thought Miss Drew was here tonight?” Nancy asked.

“Yes. I’m sure I saw her in the back of the auditorium when I happened to turn around, just before the show started. I left my seat and tried to find her but couldn’t. She went out of the building.”

People in the theater had started to crowd past the two girls and now a young man who had been with Miss Wilson came back. After introducing him to Nancy, she told him what they had been talking about.

Nancy said, “Possibly this Nancy Smith Drew is still around. She must have come back for some reason—possibly to see the play. Miss Wilson, could you take a few minutes to help me find her, since you know Miss Drew?”

“I’ll be glad to.” Miss Wilson turned to the young man, Frank Doolittle, whom Nancy had recognized as one of the star players on the Emerson football squad.

Nancy now introduced Ned, then told him, “We’ll be right back. Meet you in front of the theater.”

She and Miss Wilson dashed ahead of the others. Reaching the outside, Miss Wilson suddenly exclaimed, “There goes Miss Drew now!” She pointed to a side door of the gymnasium.

The two girls ran like mad, opened the door, and dashed inside. Only a dim light was burning and they could not see very far ahead but realized that the corridor turned abruptly.

“Miss Drew! Miss Drew!” Miss Wilson called. When no response came, Nancy tried her luck, but received no answer.

She and Miss Wilson dashed to the end of the corridor, then turned the comer. They saw no one.

“Wherever could she have been going?” Miss Wilson asked.

Nancy could only guess. “Maybe Miss Drew left some clothes in a locker in one of the rooms. And she wanted to get them, now that she apparently has severed her connection with the Dramatic Club.”

The two girls went through another door and this time found themselves at the foot of a fight of metal steps that spiraled both upward and downward. A single unshaded electric bulb illuminated the stairwell feebly.

“Up or down?” Marian Wilson asked.

“Let’s go down first,” Nancy answered. “Or, let’s save time. I’ll go down and you go up.”

When Nancy reached the floor below she found herself in the furnace room. Sure there would be no lockers here, she turned and scurried up the steps. Miss Wilson was just coming down.

"Nothing up there but a big, dark room and the stairs continue to the roof."

"Miss Drew must have used another exit," Nancy speculated. "Well, I guess all we can do is leave."

At that moment the light went out.

"Oh dear!" her companion cried. "They're turning out the lights and locking up!"

The two girls dashed along the corridor, feeling the walls until they came to the outer door. Nancy tried to lift the long bar which opened it, but this would not budge.

"We're locked in!" she exclaimed, and began banging on the door with her fist and crying, "Let us out! We're trapped!"

There was not a sound from outside.

"Whatever will we do?" Marian Wilson asked nervously.

"Frankly I don't know, but let me think a minute." A few moments later Nancy said, "That dark room you saw—were there any windows in it?"

"Yes, several."

"Maybe we can get out that way," Nancy suggested.

The girls groped their way along the corridor and up the spiral stairway. They opened the door to the dark room and made their way toward one of the windows. To their dismay, chicken wire was tacked over it and the window could not be opened. All the others had been protected the same way.

"I wonder which side of the theater this is on," Nancy speculated. "If we could only attract someone's attention!"

"But how?" Marian Wilson asked.

"I guess we'll have to break the glass and yell."

"But the chicken wire was put up there so the glass wouldn't get broken," Marian pointed out.

Nancy said she realized this, but hoped that a hard blow would break the wire as well as the glass. She began to feel around the floor with her feet, hoping to locate some heavy object. Presently she found what felt like a cannon ball. She assumed it was a ball used for shot-

put contests.

There was enough light outside for the girls to see anyone going by. As Nancy picked up the metal ball, Marian Wilson exclaimed, “I just saw a car drive up! Nancy Smith Drew got into it!”

Nancy rushed forward, hoping to break the glass and attract the young woman’s attention. But in a second the car was gone. A feeling of exasperation came over her. Suppose no one else came past whose attention she could attract!

“Here come a couple of boys. Quick! Break the glass!” Marian cried out.

“Let us out! We’re trapped!” Nancy cried

Nancy heaved the heavy ball and it did the trick. The chicken wire bent and the glass shattered.

“They heard it!” Marian cried out, jumping up and down hopefully.

Together, the two girls screamed out, “Ned! Frankl”

The boys looked around.

"Up here!" Nancy called. "We're locked in upstairs in the gym!"

Ned and Frank gazed upward in astonishment. "How'd you get there?" Frank asked.

"It's a long story," Marian replied. "Spooky in here. I don't like it."

"We'll have you out in a minute," Ned said.

The two boys raced off to find the grounds superintendent so he could open the door. Meanwhile, the girls groped their way down the stairs and were waiting at the door when it was finally opened.

"Thanks," they said, locking arms with their dates.

"Boy! What were you trying to do?" Frank asked.

"Catch up with an actress," said Nancy, chuckling. "You missed a chance for some excitement."

An explanation was quickly given. Nancy ended the story with the rueful statement that Nancy Smith Drew had disappeared again.

"What! Then coach was *here.* That's a funny one," Frank remarked.

Ned said, "Pretty shabby way to treat the Emerson Drama Club."

Nancy suddenly had an idea. "Ned," she said, "let's get my car and go to the place where Nancy Smith Drew lives. Maybe we can still stop her from getting married to Edgar Nixon!"

The two said good-by to the other couple and dashed off toward the fraternity house. They had almost reached it when a large rock came whizzing through the air. It was aimed directly at Nancy!

CHAPTER XIV

Elusive Niece

NED had caught a glimpse of the rock coming in Nancy's direction. Instantly he pulled her down to the pavement and the stone sailed over the girl's head. It crashed through one of the fraternity-house windows.

"Oh!" Nancy exclaimed, looking around quickly to see the person who had thrown the rock.

Both she and Ned saw a man running toward the parking lot. They dashed after him. Ned soon outdistanced Nancy and in a final sprint overtook the fellow, who was rather shabbily dressed.

Ned grabbed hold of the assailant's collar and yanked him around. "What was the big idea?" he said angrily. "You might have harmed my friend badly."

"But I didn't, so let me go!" the stranger retorted.

"I'll do nothing of the kind," Ned snapped. "Suppose you give me an explanation. Then I'll decide what to do."

By this time Nancy had joined them. She, too, demanded to know why the man had acted the way he had and what his name was.

Their captive began to tremble with fright. "I—I really didn't mean no harm, miss," he said. "Please don't make me tell my name. It'll be bad for me."

"Why?" Nancy said. "Would you rather tell the police?"

"Oh no! Not the police!" the man pleaded. "As I said, I didn't hurt you when I threw the stone, so you got no right to hold me. Let me go!"

Nancy and Ned looked at each other. Legally the man was right. He could insist that he had not intended to hit Nancy or the window with the stone.

"You should pay for repairing the window," Nancy said.

"I ain't got no money."

"In that case, I guess the police will have to decide what to do," Ned told him.

"Please, mister, don't do that. I'll tell you my name. It's Otto Busch. I'm just a no-good guy in this town. I'll tell you the whole story. A smoothlookin' guy came up to me down in the village and asked me if I'd like to earn some money."

"Yes?" Nancy prodded the man as he paused.

"Well, he gave me a few dollars to do a job. He showed me a picture of you, miss, and said when you come home tonight, here at this house, I was to throw a big-sized rock at you and scare you."

"Scare me about what?" Nancy queried, staring hard at Otto Busch.

The man shrugged. "I dunno. The guy didn't say. I s'posed he had something on you." Busch stopped speaking.

"Is that all?" Ned asked.

"Yeah. Now can I go?"

Nancy asked for a description of the man and was sure he was Edgar Nixon. He must be getting desperate to try such a villainous method to keep her from trying to solve the mystery about him. Perhaps he had found out she had taken the letters for his Lonely Hearts Club to the postal inspector in River Heights.

Ned let go his hold on Otto Busch. "I advise you not to be doing errands for people you don't know. How much did the man pay you for this job?"

"Twenty-five dollars."

"That's pretty high pay for throwing one stone," Ned remarked. "Suppose you turn over some of it to me to have a new window put in our fraternity house."

Otto was reluctant to do this, but seeing the determined look in the husky football player's eyes, he changed his mind and handed over five dollars. Then, quick as a ferret, he dashed off among the cars.

"We may as well let him go," said Nancy.

"What a night!" Ned remarked. "Nancy, you must be dead tired. Why don't you go to bed and let me pick you up early in the morning to go to the house where Miss Nancy Smith Drew has been living?"

When Nancy demurred, he added, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll drive past the place myself. If there's a light in the house, I'll ring the bell. If the elusive heiress is home, I'll have her telephone you."

“I guess,” Nancy mused, “that the man who left the money to his niece had no idea she would be so hard to find.”

Nancy suddenly realized she was extremely weary and consented to the arrangement. She waited up for half an hour but no phone call came and finally she went to bed.

True to his word, Ned was ready by eight-thirty the next morning to take her to Mrs. Roderick’s guesthouse on Linden Road. The owner was a pleasant, middle-aged woman and her house looked immaculate.

“Miss Drew?” she said when asked about her guest. “She slept here last night, but she has already gone out.” The woman smiled. “She is busy buying a trousseau.”

Nancy asked quickly, “Is she wearing a wedding ring?”

Mrs. Roderick laughed. “No, but after that little trip she just made, Miss Drew returned with a beautiful engagement ring.”

“When will she be back?” Nancy inquired, trying not to show her mounting excitement.

“She didn’t say. Miss Drew was carrying a suitcase, and I expect she planned to do a lot of shopping and fill it up.”

Nancy and Ned exchanged glances. Was it possible the actress would not return?

At once Mrs. Roderick asked, “Is something the matter?”

“I don’t know,” Nancy replied. “I have been trying hard to find Miss Drew because I have a very important message for her. I can’t reveal everything, but when your Miss Drew returns, tell her another Nancy Drew was here and must speak to her at once. Above all, she mustn’t get married until I talk with her.”

Mrs. Roderick started in surprise. “You mean there is something the matter with the man she’s going to marry?”

Nancy said she preferred not to say anything more. “But, Mrs. Roderick, please be sure to have Miss Drew get in touch with me at the Omega Chi Epsilon House.”

The woman stared in bafflement. “I assure you Miss Drew is a lovely person. Surely she would not be doing something underhanded.”

“Oh, I’m not accusing her of doing anything underhanded,” Nancy replied. “But she may be doing something too hastily.”

She and Ned decided to leave before Mrs. Roderick could think of any further questions. Nancy thanked her, asked the woman to give

Miss Drew the message, and hurried back to the convertible.

As they drove into the campus, Ned headed the car for the gymnasium. “I’m due to report,” he said. “I’ll see you after the game.”

Nancy patted his arm and wished him all kinds of good luck. “I’ll be rooting for you at the top of my lungs,” she added as he grinned and got out of the car.

She slid over to the driver’s seat and turned in the direction of the fraternity house. Suddenly Nancy had a hunch and took a road that led to the Town Hall. She rushed inside and up to the Marriage License Bureau. The clerk on duty smiled when she eagerly asked if a Nancy Smith Drew had obtained a license recently.

“No. Guess you’ll have to try some other town around here if you want to find her. Is she a friend of yours?”

“Sort of,” Nancy replied. “Anyway I must find Miss Drew. If, by any chance, she should come here, tell her another Nancy Drew at the Omega Chi Epsilon House simply must see her before she gets married.”

The clerk blinked. “Sounds like a mystery thriller.” he remarked.

Nancy did not comment. After thanking him, she dashed from the building and hurried to her car.

On her way once more, Nancy mulled over the case. “I have a strong hunch Miss Drew isn’t going back to Mrs. Roderick’s—at least not for a while. Suppose—just suppose Edgar Nixon has thought out a whole new scheme to escape being caught. Now what could it be?”

Nancy discarded many theories, then one popped into her mind that she felt was worth pursuing. “It’s just possible Edgar plans to take his bride to London. Then, as if quite by accident, she’ll learn of her inheritance. He’ll see to it that she doesn’t find out in the United States.”

She parked the car and entered the fraternity house. Nearly everyone was out, and no one was using the telephone.

“I think I’ll call up the overseas airlines leaving from New York.”

She got the list of numbers from information and then began calling. Between long waits, due either to busy lines, or the reservation clerks having to look up the information, half an hour went with no luck.

“Well, here goes for the last one.” Nancy sighed as she dialed the number.

In a few minutes a pleasant voice answered. Nancy put the same question. “Have you a reservation for today or someday soon for a Mr. and Mrs. Edgar Nixon, or Mr. Nixon and Miss Nancy Smith Drew?”

“Just a minute.”

The reservations girl came back on the wire. “Hello? ... Yes, they leave on—”

The connection was suddenly cut off.

CHAPTER XV

A Worse Mix-up

THOUGH Nancy tried over and over again to call the airline back, the wire continued to be busy.

"Oh phooey!" she said to herself impatiently.

Suddenly Nancy realized that she still did not know if the reservation was for Mr. and Mrs. Edgar Nixon, or for Edgar and Nancy Smith Drew. Also, she had not found out whether or not they were going to London, nor on what day they were flying.

Before trying the airline again, Nancy had to relinquish the phone to several students who wanted to make calls. Soon the fraternity house held a mob of chattering, laughing boys and girls. Even if Nancy could have made the connection, she would not have heard what was being said at the other end of the line.

Bess and George came running up to her. "Nancy, we've been looking all over for you. It's almost lunchtime," said Bess. "My, you look as if you're in the doldrums instead of having fun. What's the matter?"

Nancy brought her friends up to date on the latest clue. "Well, here goes one more try for the airline."

The cousins could tell by the expression on Nancy's face that the line was still busy. Finally George said, "If Miss Drew didn't tell Mrs. Roderick she was going away, she's probably coming back so you can talk to her later. Come on. Time to eat, and then we'll have to hurry off to the game."

Nancy was torn between two desires. She hated to give up her pursuit of the other Nancy Drew. On the other hand, she would not miss seeing Ned play in this big and final game of the football season for anything.

At that instant the telephone rang and Nancy answered it. "Chi Omega Epsilon House?" a young woman's voice asked.

"Yes."

"I'd like to speak to Nancy Drew."

"You're talking to her. Is this Marian Wilson?"

"Yes. Nancy, I'm so glad I got you before you left."

"Any news about Miss Drew?" Nancy asked her.

"No, I haven't seen her. I drove around town, thinking I might get a glimpse of her, but she wasn't in sight."

Marian Wilson said she had a request to make. "Since both Ned and Frank are playing, how about you and I attending the game together?"

"I think that's a wonderful idea," said Nancy. "You know, there's just an outside chance that Nancy Smith Drew may be there, and you can spot her."

It was arranged that Marian was to come over to the fraternity house directly after lunch and go to the game with the girls. Dave and Burt, who were on the second-string team, had left already for the stadium.

An hour later, just as Nancy was about to leave the house with the group, a telephone call came from her father. "You must have something important to tell me," she said quickly.

"I have tracked down the firm which offered to present Nancy Smith Drew so she can claim her inheritance."

"What kind of an agency is it?" his daughter inquired.

"A shady outfit and not to be trusted."

Nancy was excited at the news. "Maybe the agency's story is a fake, and some impostor is going to appear calling herself Nancy Smith Drew."

"That's what Mr. Bates-Jones thinks," her father said.

She told him all that she had learned the night before and during the morning. "Your clue gives me an idea, Dad. Maybe Edgar Nixon doesn't intend to marry Nancy Smith Drew at all. Instead, he's taking her away to keep her from being found by me."

"It's a good guess," the lawyer remarked.

"And here's another thing," Nancy went on. "Perhaps Edgar Nixon is already married to somebody else who is in cahoots with him and is going to play the part."

Mr. Drew sighed. "This mystery gets to be more mixed up all the time. Well, Nancy, I advise you to forget the whole thing for the

afternoon and evening. Enjoy the game and have fun at the dance tonight."

Nancy laughed. "I don't promise to forget the mystery, but I know I'll have a marvelous time. Good-by, Dad. Take care."

On the way to the game, Nancy brought her friends up to date on the latest development.

Marian Wilson was shocked. "We mustn't let that lovely Miss Drew be swindled!" she cried.

Bess spoke up. "Nancy is doing everything she can. She has left messages everywhere for Nancy Smith Drew not to get married and to get in touch with her immediately. Now let's concentrate on the game." The girls agreed and Nancy said no more about the mystery.

There was a huge crowd on hand for this important game between Emerson and State University. Vendors stood outside the stadium selling pennants and football pins, and hats and flowers of the colors of the two colleges. Inside, the bands of both schools were playing. This, together with whistles and high-pitched conversation, made a great din. It turned to thunderous applause and cheers as the two teams trotted onto the field.

Nancy and her friends had seats ideally located near the center of the field. They cheered lustily, then quieted as a whistle was blown by the referee and the captains of the opposing teams met to confer with the officials.

"Emerson receives the kick!" came the announcement over the loudspeaker.

The ball sailed through the air. The game was on! The blue jerseys of State U swept down the field.

"Frank's catching it!" Marian cried out as the ball came down.

After deftly side-stepping a would-be tackler, Frank cut to his left, and with a good block from Ned Nickerson, sped to the thirty-yard line before being tackled.

Excitement ran high in the stands, packed solid with spectators in red, blue, and green sports clothes. Pennants waved amid the laughter and cheering spectators.

"Now watch Ned go!" Nancy said. "Come on, Ned, touchdown!"

On the playing field, Ned Nickerson realized there was no magic formula for conquering State U. He passed to a halfback, who tried an end sweep. It was good for three yards.

On the next play Ned faded back to pass, but apparently State U had scouted him well, because two linebackers came charging through. His toss was rushed and fell short of the receiver. A groan went up from Emerson.

Ned himself tried an off-tackle slant but failed to make the necessary ten yards. Then he dropped back to punt. The ball soared high and far, giving Emerson defenders plenty of time to race down the field. The State receiver was stopped in his tracks as Emerson fans roared their approval.

"Come on, State! Sock it to 'em!" came cries from across the field, but State fared no better. They also had to kick on fourth down. Frank again received the ball. But instead of running with it, he lateraled to Ned. The speedy quarterback dived, ducked, wriggled, and side-stepped as he flew up the field.

"Stop him! Stop him!" screamed State's rooters.

Now there was only one man between Ned and the goal line. The quarterback tried to side-step him.

Slam! With a bone-jarring tackle, Ned was brought to the turf twelve feet short of a six pointer. He rose slowly from the ground and limped back into the huddle, but his chest hurt.

"You all right?" Frank asked him.

"Sure. Just shaken up a little. Let's give 'em the down-and-out pass pattern."

When the ball was snapped, Ned rolled back and to his left. Emerson's left end faked out the opposing halfback and dashed toward the corner of the field. Ned rifled a pass. It was a perfect pitch. The end caught it in his upstretched arms and fell across the goal line!

"Eeh! Yeeh!" Marian exclaimed, jumping up and down and waving her arms wildly.

Emerson stands were a bedlam of noise and motion. Their team led, 6-0.

"Come on, Ned!" Nancy cried out. "Make it seven!"

She felt confident about Ned's place-kicking. The sportswriters had praised his toe. Now he would add to their score!

As Ned walked back into the huddle, he was still wincing with the pain in his chest. The teams faced each other. State's linemen were poised, ready to spring forward at the snap of the ball.

The ball was passed low to Frank. He set it up for the kick. Ned's leg

came forward, his toe hit the ball, and sent it sailing into the air as the spectators rose to their feet. There was dead silence for an instant, then a deafening roar.

No good! The referee's motion indicated that the ball had missed by inches.

"That's a shame," Marian said.

"What happened to the great Nickerson?" a State fan yelled. "He better go to another college where he can learn how to punt."

Nancy was concentrating on Ned. "Oh dear, I hope nothing has happened to him," she said to Marian. "He was limping a little."

Suddenly Nancy's hand flew to her mouth as she stifled a shriek. "Oh no!"

Ned Nickerson had collapsed on the green turf.

CHAPTER XVI

Mistaken Identity

INSTANTLY Frank called for time out. The water boy rushed onto the field, followed by the Emerson trainer. Nancy rose from her seat, excused herself as she stepped in front of other spectators, and finally made it to the aisle.

Worried, Nancy hastened down the concrete steps toward the field. By the time she reached the railing, Ned was being carried from the field by Frank and the trainer.

"Ned! Ned!" she cried out, but he did not hear her as the trainer eased him carefully onto the bench. Players crowded around quickly and Nancy lost sight of her friend.

Marian came to stand at Nancy's side. "I'm sure he'll be all right, honey," she said consolingly. "Ned has been hurt before and always managed to return to the game."

Suddenly Nancy saw Frank walking away from the bench toward the field, where the men were waiting to resume play.

"Frank, is he all right?" Nancy cried out. The fullback turned and waved at the two girls, but said nothing.

"Come on. Let's get back to our seats," Marian said.

Nancy only half-watched the game. Her mind was on Ned. But nothing spectacular happened. It was a defensive battle with each side gaining a few yards, then being forced to kick to its opponent.

During the half-time period, the marching band performed, but the colorful formations were lost on Nancy because she was worried about Ned. But when the players trotted back, she relaxed. Ned was among them!

"Oh!" she said with a sigh of relief. Ned, however, remained benched. Emerson's defenses could well have used him the two periods that followed. State's backfield gained momentum. Finally they were on the two-yard line of Emerson.

"Hold that line! Hold that line!" Nancy screamed along with the Emerson rooting section.

But on the next play State scored. Now the cry arose, "Block that kick! Block that kick!"

The teams lined up. Toe met ball. Good! The score stood 7-6 in favor of State U.

Nancy and Marian screamed themselves hoarse as the autumn shadows settled over the stadium and a brisk wind began to blow across the field.

"Oh dear," Nancy said. "Only three minutes left, Marian."

The score was still 7-6. The Emerson substitute quarterback was doing a good job, but lacked Ned's field generalship. The boys tried, but it was obvious to all that they were tiring. At last Emerson worked the ball down to State's thirty-five-yard line. It was fourth down.

"They'll have to kick," Marian said.

"Wait! Look!" Nancy cried.

On the sideline Ned was trotting back and forth. After a quick word from the coach, he snatched his helmet and put it on as he ran onto the field.

"A kick!" the spectators yelled. "Nickerson's going to kick!"

As the two sides lined up, every spectator in the stadium rose to his feet, cheering. The distance to the goal post seemed impossible!

Ned braced himself. The ball was snapped. Frank placed it down.

Thud! The ball arched high and sped through the air. Would it make the crossbar? Would the wind blow it to one side?

The answer came in a deafening roar from the Emerson side. Ned had scored! Three more points went up on the scoreboard—Emerson 9, State U 7. Colored streamers flew down from the stands, and confetti rained over the delirious spectators.

"Ned did it!" Nancy screamed. "He won the game!"

Minutes later it was all over. Emerson fans flooded onto the field. They hoisted Ned to their shoulders and carried him to the dresssing room.

Nancy was waiting by the door as Ned stepped out later. "You were simply magnificent," she said.

The next second Nancy's expression changed completely. Ned noticed it at once. "What's the matter?"

“Oh, I don’t want to take away any of the glory from the celebration,” she said, “but I just saw a man over there who looks like Edgar Nixon!”

Burt and Dave, who had come out with Ned, offered to dash across to where the man was and detain him until Nancy could get there.

“Ned, please wait here,” Nancy requested, and sprinted after the two boys.

But by the time she reached them, the man they had stopped was laughing. Nancy heard him say, “No, I’m not Edgar Nixon.”

Burt turned to introduce Nancy. “This is the young lady who thought you were someone she’s looking for.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” she said. “From a distance you looked like a man named Edgar Nixon.”

The man continued to grin. “You know twice today I’ve been mistaken for that person. And both times by very pretty young ladies.”

Nancy blushed as she asked who the other young lady was.

The stranger replied, “I don’t know her name but she said she was an actress.”

Nancy was puzzled. If the person was Nancy Smith Drew and had met Edgar Nixon at the guesthouse in Ridgefield, surely she would know what he looked like.

The man she had detained was saying, “I’d like to meet this double of mine someday.”

“When did you talk to this actress?” Nancy asked.

“Just before the game. She said her date was supposed to meet her for lunch at the hotel. I’m staying there.”

“Is Mr. Nixon there too?” Dave spoke up.

“I don’t know.”

When Ned heard the story, he insisted upon accompanying Nancy downtown and inquiring at the hotel for Edgar Nixon and Nancy Smith Drew. To her disappointment, she found that neither was registered.

“If Edgar Nixon is in town, he’ll probably be at one of the guesthouses or motels,” Ned suggested.

“Ned,” Nancy said quietly, “you were hurt in the game today. Don’t you think you ought to go back to your room and rest?”

The football player shook his head. “I’m all right now. The wind

was knocked out of me and I got dizzy and faint for a while. No, I insist upon going with you on this hunt."

Nancy beamed at him. "You're certainly a good sport."

Ned laughed. "I don't want to lose my girl to some kook. If you do come across Edgar Nixon while you're alone, he may harm you."

Nancy and Ned's errand proved to be futile. Neither the suspect nor Nancy Smith Drew was known at any of the places where they asked. To be sure that he was not using an alias Nancy showed the picture she had borrowed from Ira. In each case the person she consulted insisted that no one who looked like him had stayed there recently and most of them did not recall ever having seen him.

On their way back to the campus, Nancy said, "Ned, let's stop at Mrs. Roderick's. She may have some word about Miss Drew."

Nancy fervently hoped that the actress might even be there. Again she was disappointed. Mrs. Roderick said that Miss Drew had not returned.

"She must have filled her suitcase with new clothes and left Emerson. After what you told me, I just haven't been able to stop worrying about Miss Drew."

Nancy mentioned the possibility that the actress and the man she planned to marry had left Emerson to go to London. "May I call the airline and find out more about it? I was cut off when talking to them this morning."

"Certainly," Mrs. Roderick said. "I only have one phone. It's in the kitchen. Help yourself."

This time Nancy was able to put through a satisfactory call. She learned that a Mr. Edgar Nixon had a reservation on the nine-thirty Monday night plane to London. His wife had canceled.

"Thank you very much," she said. "Now will you please look and see if you have a reservation for a Miss Nancy Smith Drew?"

After a few minutes she was told that the airline did have a reservation for a person by that name. Nancy hung up and walked back to the living room where Mrs. Roderick and Ned were waiting. She reported what she had learned.

"The question now is whether this is the Edgar Nixon I'm looking for. And is Nancy Smith Drew the real one or a person who is going to present herself as the heiress?"

Mrs. Roderick shook her head. "What a dreadful mess this is! Well, I hope you are able to settle it."

“I’m afraid,” said Nancy, “that Edgar Nixon intends to marry the Nancy Smith Drew who will inherit the money, but I’m hoping I can prevent the marriage.”

“How in the world can you do that?” the woman asked.

Ned spoke up with a smile. “I can guess,” he said. “It wouldn’t surprise me if Nancy intends to take off for New York and stop the couple from flying to London.”

Nancy giggled. “How well you know me! That’s exactly what I have in mind.”

“Well, I wish you luck,” Mrs. Roderick said. “And when you have a chance, do drop me a postcard and tell me how everything comes out.”

“I’ll do that,” Nancy promised. She thanked the woman for being so cooperative.

It was dark when Nancy and Ned came out of the house. They were pleased it was a clear crisp evening for the dance.

When they reached the fraternity parking lot, it was full. “We’ll have to leave your car in the street,” Ned remarked.

Nancy, who was at the wheel, turned around and headed down the street. Parking was allowed only on one side and she had to go to the next block before finding a space.

Ned teased her by saying he was sure she would never squeeze her convertible in such a tight parking place. However, after several skillful twists of the wheel, Nancy maneuvered the car in the vacant spot. Ned admitted he could not have done a finer job.

Nancy locked up the convertible. Then she and Ned started walking on the side of the street where no cars were allowed to be parked.

About halfway back to the fraternity house, they suddenly became aware of bright lights behind them. The two turned automatically. To their horror, a car had raced up over the curb and was heading directly at them!

CHAPTER XVII

Fake Summons

THOUGH terrified, Nancy and Ned reacted quickly. With a tremendous leap they managed to get out of the way of the oncoming car. The couple landed on some tree roots and lost their balance.

Suddenly it was dark around them. They realized that the driver of the car which had almost hit them had turned off his headlights. In a second the car roared back into the street and sped away.

Nancy and Ned picked themselves up and stared after the vehicle. By a street light they caught a glimpse of the car. It was red in color.

The driver deliberately tried to run us down," Ned stormed. "That was your enemy, Nancy."

"I'm afraid so," she agreed. "Ned, we must report this to the police at once. Let's go back to my car and drive downtown."

"Are you sure you're all right?" Ned asked solicitously. "You don't want to go back to the fraternity house first?"

Nancy assured him her nerves were steady now. "I'm just mad," she said. "The person in that car was either Edgar Nixon or one of his henchmen. I'm going to keep after him until he's brought to justice!"

Ned laughed. "That a girl!" he said, patting her shoulder.

At police headquarters they talked to Captain Krate. Ned told of the recent near-accident, then Nancy went on to reveal her suspicions about a man named Edgar Nixon who ran a Lonely Hearts Club.

"Lonely Hearts Club, eh?" the captain repeated. He turned the pages of a large book on his desk. "I have a notation here to be on the lookout for such a person. We've had complaints from two women who said that an Edgar Nixon promised them a husband. But he never produced any."

"How did the club operate?" Nancy asked.

Captain Krate said that the total sum for finding a husband was one

hundred dollars which was paid on the installment plan of twenty-five dollars a month.

"These poor women sent their last payment but never heard from Nixon again. When they made inquiries at the houses where he had lived, they learned that he had moved away and left no forwarding address.

Nancy reported how she had come upon one such address and seen a couple of letters, each one containing twenty-five dollars. "But by that time he had moved."

"That's always the pattern," Captain Krate remarked. "Do you know the names of any of his victims?"

"Possibly one," she replied. "Her name is the same as mine. That's how I became mixed up in the mystery."

Nancy told him about the actress by the name of Nancy Smith Drew. "I'm so afraid she's not only a victim of Edgar Nixon's dishonesty, but that he intends to marry her and help himself to an inheritance she's going to get."

The police captain frowned. "This is a complicated case. Well, I shall put out an alarm also for this Miss Nancy Smith Drew."

Nancy then left with Ned and went back to the fraternity house. Bess and George were already in the girls' bedroom and were amazed at the story she had to tell about the near-accident.

"It seems as if you aren't safe anywhere," Bess said. "Nancy, please be careful."

"I promise," Nancy said with a chuckle. "But my enemy seems to strike in such peculiar ways, all I can do is jump out of his path as fast as possible."

She hurried to take a shower and get dressed for the dance. Dinner was merry and afterward the couples strolled off to the gymnasium where the dance was to be held.

Football star Ned Nickerson became the center of attention with congratulations, handshaking, and backslapping the order of the evening. Finally, as the band began to play, he escaped onto the dance floor with Nancy.

The evening was about half over and Nancy and Ned were seated on one side of the gym when a boy came up and said that Ned was wanted on the telephone. He excused himself to Nancy and hurried off.

A moment later the band started a lively tune and one by one

couples began to go back onto the dance floor. Bess, George, Burt, and Dave waved to Nancy as they passed by. At that moment the music suddenly stopped and the drums began to roll. Everyone became quiet and listened attentively.

The band leader called out, “Where is Nancy Drew?”

“Here I am!” Nancy said, jumping up and raising her hand.

“Will you please step up here,” the leader requested. “The police want to see you.”

As Nancy hurried forward, a gasp went up around the room. Why did the police want to see her?

When she reached the band, the young leader said, “I’m sorry I had to call out that way, but I didn’t know you. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” said Nancy. “Tell me, what’s this about the police?”

She was told that two detectives were waiting for her on the stage of the adjoining theater. “The student who came to give us the message said that they have news for you of the other Miss Drew.”

Excitedly Nancy hurried from the gymnasium and down the long corridor which led to the stage in the theater. The entrance door was open and footlights were on. The curtain had been hoisted about halfway up.

Nancy looked around but did not see anyone. Where were the detectives?

“Hello!” she called out, thinking they might have walked out into the far wings, where the dressing rooms were.

There was no answer. Nancy was puzzled and turned to look out over the darkened seats. As she stood pondering directly under the curtain, she heard a noise above her. A sixth sense told the young detective to move in a hurry. She jumped forward just as the heavy curtain crashed to the floor.

Terror seized Nancy. She leaped across the footlights to the floor and sped as if on wings to the corridor leading to the gym. She had not gone far when she was met by Ned. Bess, George, Burt, and Dave were following.

“What’s up?” Ned asked, seeing the look of fright on Nancy’s face.

Turning, Nancy pointed back toward the stage. “In there! The message was a hoax! Someone tried to kill me by dropping the curtain!”

Bess shrieked and held onto Nancy. “Don’t go back in there!”

“She’s right,” said Burt. “You girls stay here. We’ll find out what’s going on in the theater.”

Nancy, still shaken by what had happened, agreed to wait in the corridor with the other girls.

The three boys were gone for several minutes, then returned to report they had found no one. Everyone was upset over the incident.

“Let’s find the person who brought the message to the band leader,” George suggested.

Ned turned to the other boys. “Isn’t Jim Hankin on duty outside the gym tonight?” he asked.

“Yes, I think he is.”

Ned explained that Jim was the guard for the evening to turn away from the dance anyone who was not invited.

The group went at once to speak to him. Jim said a plainclothesman had come up to him and showed a badge. The detective said he did not want to intrude and asked that a student take the message to Nancy.

Nancy jumped forward just as the curtain crashed to the floor

"I didn't know her, so I asked our band leader to do it," Jim explained.

He was quickly told what had happened and looked worried. "I

don't think that man will show up around here again, but if he does, I'll sure hold onto him and yell for help."

Nancy spoke up. "What did the man look like?"

She rather expected Jim to describe Edgar Nixon, but was told that the fake plainclothesman was tall, heavy-set, and had blond hair. Nancy assumed he was a pal of Edgar Nixon.

The Lonely Hearts Club suspect probably did not want to take a chance on being identified and had sent someone else. He was probably an out-of-towner, not known to the Emerson police.

Nancy and her friends returned to the dance, but they did not wait until it was over. Though Nancy hated to admit it, she was exhausted. The day had been a strenuous one for Ned and he also was pretty tired.

Everyone slept soundly, but was up in time the next morning to go the special chapel service arranged for students and their dates. As soon as it was over, Nancy and Ned returned to the Omega Chi Epsilon House. The telephone was ringing and the call proved to be for Nancy.

"It's from a Mrs. Gruen," she was told by the student on duty at the time.

Nancy picked up the receiver and said, "Hello. Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine and your father is too," the housekeeper said, "but things are not well with Ira Nixon. His brother came last night and robbed him!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Skakespearean Puzzle

HANNAH Gruen explained to Nancy that after church she had taken some food to poor Ira Nixon.

"He was in a bad state," she reported. "The theft occurred late last night. Edgar came there and pounded on the door until Ira let him in. He never so much as asked how Ira was feeling, or when he was going back to work or anything. That dreadful Edgar started right in demanding money."

"You mean part of the inheritance?"

"No, no. Edgar said Ira always had been a miser and he was sure he had money hidden in the house. When Ira wouldn't answer him, Edgar started hunting for some himself."

Nancy was shocked at the story. She asked if Edgar had found any money.

"That's the dreadful part of it," Mrs. Gruen went on. "Ira did have some in the house—lots of it. He was very foolish not to have put it in a bank."

"How did Edgar get hold of the money?" Nancy queried.

"He stole it," the housekeeper said. "Edgar Nixon practically tore the house apart. He ripped sofa cushions, bed pillows, and emptied every drawer in the house."

"How dreadful!" Nancy exclaimed. "Do you know how much money he got?"

The answer stunned her. "One thousand dollars!"

"Oh no!" Nancy cried out. "Poor Ira! How was he feeling when you left him?"

"Pretty bad," Mrs. Gruen replied. "I warmed up the food I took and made him eat some of it. This quieted him a bit, but I kept telling him he should notify the police. He refuses to and wouldn't let me."

Nancy was incensed. But she could see that Ira, despite his family misfortune, did not want any unfavorable publicity about his half brother. After all, they did have the same mother.

"I thought I'd better call you, Nancy, and tell you right away," Mrs. Gruen said. "What do you think should be done?"

Nancy asked the housekeeper if she had spoken to Mr. Drew about it. "No, I haven't had a chance. After church, your father went out into the country to see a client. He was planning to have dinner there."

For several seconds Nancy sat lost in thought. Finally Mrs. Gruen said, "Nancy, are you still there?"

"Yes. I'm just thinking. Wait until I get back before doing anything. We girls are heading home this afternoon."

She quickly told Hannah Gruen what had happened at Emerson and said that actually she was no closer to finding either Edgar Nixon or Nancy Smith Drew than she had been days ago.

"Well, Hannah dear, I guess I'd better hang up now. Ned and the others are waiting for me to have lunch. I'll see you around suppertime."

At the lunch table Nancy told her friends about the latest twist in the mystery. Her friends were dismayed, and Dave remarked, "Edgar Nixon is one of the slipperiest crooks I've ever heard of."

Nancy said, "Before we girls leave Emerson, I'd like to call on Mrs. Roderick once more. It's just possible she has heard from Nancy Smith Drew but hasn't bothered to telephone me about it."

Bess and George offered to do Nancy's packing while she was gone. In a little while she and Ned rode off in the convertible.

When Mrs. Roderick opened her front door, she exclaimed, "You're just the people I want to see! I was going to call you, Nancy, but I couldn't remember which fraternity house you said you were in."

"You have news of Miss Drew?" Nancy asked.

"Indeed I do. Please come inside and sit down. I'm so weak from the shock I just had that my knees are still wobbly."

They all went into the living room and sat down. Mrs. Roderick explained that she taught a Sunday-school class and then went to church service afterward.

"I thought for a change I'd stay out to dinner, so I went to a tearoom that's open on Sunday. This was the reason I didn't get home until a a little while ago."

So far, there was nothing about Mrs. Roderick's story to upset her. Nancy and Ned waited patiently for her to go on.

"As soon as I came into the house, I went upstairs to change my clothes. To get to my bedroom, I had to pass Miss Drew's door. When I glanced into the room, I saw something on the bureau. This seemed funny to me so I went in to look at it."

Mrs. Roderick went on to say that lying on the bureau was two weeks' room rent but no explanation by Miss Drew as to why she had left it.

"I thought I'd better investigate to see if her clothes and jewelry and everything were gone.

Sure enough they were. There's no question but that she moved out."

Nancy asked Mrs. Roderick if Miss Drew had left any kind of a message.

"Oh yes," the woman said, "but it didn't say anything personal—wasn't even addressed to me. In fact it really wasn't a note. Just a lot of words scribbled on a piece of paper."

Neither Nancy nor Ned was sure this was the case but hesitated to ask to see the note.

"You know how eager we are to find Miss Drew," Nancy said. "If you have no idea where she's going, do you mind if I look around her room for a clue?"

"No, go ahead," Mrs. Roderick said, and led the young people upstairs.

She watched in interest as the couple made a thorough search of the place. Finally they admitted defeat.

Nancy turned to Mrs. Roderick. "Are you sure that Miss Drew came here herself?"

The woman looked startled. Then she answered slowly, "No, I'm not. And nobody else around here would have seen who it was. We're church-going folks on this street, so everyone would have been out."

"Then it's just possible," Nancy said, "that someone else could have used Miss Drew's key and come in."

"I suppose so," Mrs. Roderick agreed. Suddenly she turned and looked straight at the couple. "Are you two detectives?" she asked.

The young people began to laugh, then Ned said, "I'm not, but Nancy Drew is the best girl detective in the whole world!"

"Don't you believe him," Nancy said quickly. "I have solved some

mysteries, I'll admit, and I enjoy it, but I'm sure there are many other girls who could do the same."

Mrs. Roderick was silent a few moments, then she said, "I think I'd better show you that paper with the funny notes on it. I put it in my room. See what you can make out of the thing."

She went to get it and soon returned, holding a sheet of white paper on which several verses were written in small handwriting. Nancy and Ned read them quickly.

"These are quotations from Shakespeare," Nancy told Mrs. Roderick.

"Shakespeare? Then I suppose it's not so funny," the woman remarked, "since Miss Drew was coaching the Shakespearean play."

Ned requested that Nancy read the various lines aloud. She did so, pausing between each quotation and puckering her brow. They said:

My mind is troubled, like a fountain stirr'd;
And I myself see not the bottom of it.
Striving to better, oft we mar what's well.
We that are true lovers, run into strange capers.
Prosperity's the very bond of love.
... so we profess
Ourselves to be the slaves of chance.

Better three hours too soon than a minute too late.

Travelers must be content.

It is the stars,
The stars above us, govern our conditions.

When Nancy finished reading, Mrs. Roderick remarked, "If that was meant to be a message to me, I can't make head or tail of it."

Ned admitted that he could not fathom the meaning of the conglomeration of quotes. Since Nancy had said nothing, he asked her, "Have you any idea what this means?"

Nancy smiled. "Yes. I think I know."

CHAPTER XIX

A Trap

MRS. RODERICK and Ned waited breathlessly for Nancy's interpretation of the Shakespearean quotations.

As Nancy continued to study the words, Mrs. Roderick said impatiently, "If Miss Drew left that paper for me, how in the world did she expect me to get any message out of it? I'm not familiar with Shakespeare's plays."

"I can't answer that," Nancy replied, "but this is what I think she was trying to tell you. First of all, Miss Drew believes she has fallen in love but she has some doubts."

"I should think she would," Mrs. Roderick said, "if the man she thinks she has fallen in love with is as bad as you picture him."

Ned, interested in Nancy's findings, begged her to go on.

"Well, Miss Drew is about to take a chance anyway," Nancy said.

The others nodded and waited for her to proceed.

"The bride and groom, or the couple, are going traveling, probably by air. I think that was the reference to the stars. And it will be a night flight."

"Why couldn't it be on a ship?" Mrs. Roderick asked.

Ned grinned. "I think I can guess that one. The quotations mentioned that the stars had governed the condition. That could mean weather. If it's a bad night, their plane wouldn't be able to take off."

Mrs. Roderick looked at the list again. "Here's one you haven't told us the meaning of. It says, 'Better three hours too soon than a minute too late.' "

"That is puzzling," Nancy admitted, "but my guess is that Nancy Smith Drew, having some real doubts about the whole thing, wishes that you, Mrs. Roderick, could come to the plane before she flies."

A frightened expression came over the woman's face and she threw

her hands into the air. “My goodness, I couldn’t go to New York! I’d like to help Miss Drew. She is a lovely person and if she is in trouble she needs help. But I must say she could at least have left me a note I could understand and say good-by and make her request in plain English.”

“I have a hunch,” said Nancy, “that Edgar Nixon was with her when she came here and the poor girl had no chance to write you an explanation. The next best thing she could do was to put a message in the form of a code and the first thing that came to her mind was Shakespearean quotations.”

Mrs. Roderick shook her head. “This is too much for me. Well, I just hope that whatever Miss Drew is going to do she won’t be sorry for it. I’m afraid I can’t help her, though.”

Ned spoke up. “If Edgar Nixon is as slick as you think, Nancy, I bet I know what his next move was. When he got to thinking about the quotations, he’d deduce that you’d come here and find out they had a special meaning. My hunch is that he has already canceled their flight reservations.”

Nancy agreed and asked him to telephone the airline and find out. In a few minutes he learned that the reservations for Mr. Nixon and Nancy Smith Drew for the Monday night flight to London had indeed been canceled.

Mrs. Roderick was very upset. “Do you think they are still around here?” she asked.

Nancy shook her head. “By this time Edgar Nixon knows the police are after him. He has probably changed cars again and left Emerson. It’s likely he sold his red one to the pal who nearly ran us down.

“He probably went to Ira Nixon’s in the new car, stole the thousand dollars, and will meet Miss Drew in New York. Or, if they’re already married, she’s with him now.”

Nancy asked Ned to call other airlines and this time he had good news. He located a new reservation for Nixon and Miss Drew.

“I think,” he said, “that Miss Drew couldn’t get her passport changed in a hurry, so she’s using the one with her maiden name on it.”

Nancy sighed. “Even though I may be too late to prevent a wedding, I can alert the New York police where to nab Edgar Nixon.”

As Nancy and Ned got ready to leave, tears came to Mrs. Roderick’s eyes. “You people are very kind and I do hope you can do something for poor Miss Drew. I’m afraid she has lost her head and has no

relative or anybody in this country to help her."

"She has friends," said Nancy, "but I imagine she's too proud to ask their advice."

Ned suggested that they stop at Emerson police headquarters, to see if there was any news of the elusive couple and to ask the chief to notify the New York police.

They were told that there were no leads and the officers were glad that Nancy had one to suggest. Word would be sent to New York immediately.

As Nancy and Ned left police headquarters, she glanced at her watch. "Oh, I didn't realize how much time has passed. Bess and George and I will be dreadfully late getting home. Ned, would you mind calling Hannah and telling her that I won't be there in time for supper after all?"

"Glad to."

When they reached the fraternity house, George and Bess were waiting with their dates in the hallway. The girls' luggage was piled up.

"We began to think you had gone home without us," George teased.

The couple grinned and Ned said, "Wait until you hear what we've found out." The story was quickly told about the quotations.

Burt burst out laughing. "Say, how about sitting in for me, Nancy, in my Shakespeare class? You might pull an A for me."

It did not take long to load the car. After thanking the boys for a wonderful weekend, the girls jumped in. With a last wave, Nancy drove off.

The journey was uneventful. The girls did not even stop to eat.

"It's so late," said Nancy as they neared the outskirts of River Heights, "how about you girls spending the night with me?"

They agreed, since they did not want Nancy to make the last part of the trip alone. As soon as they reached the Drew home, the cousins phoned their parents.

Both Mr. Drew and Mrs. Gruen had welcomed the girls eagerly. Hannah had prepared some tasty chicken and lettuce sandwiches, a large bowl of fresh cut-up fruit, and a chocolate cake.

As the girls ate, they related the latest items in the mystery. "Amazing!" said Mr. Drew.

Finally Nancy changed the subject. "How's Ira Nixon?"

Her father answered. “I went over there as soon as I got home and heard about the theft. I urged Ira to inform the police, but he still steadfastly refused to do so. He seemed to be calmer, however, so I did not think it was necessary for me to stay or to ask a neighbor to come in.”

The three girls began to suppress yawns and Mrs. Gruen suggested that they get to bed as soon as possible. They all slept soundly, but Nancy awoke early with a persisting thought in her mind. She proposed it to Bess and George.

“Girls, if we can get permission, what would you say to going to New York? Nancy Smith Drew will need moral support when the police arrest Edgar Nixon.”

George’s face broke into a broad grin. “I can’t think of anything I’d like better than to see the police nab that cruel man.”

Bess said, “If you tell Nancy Smith Drew about her inheritance, maybe she won’t feel so bad about having a husband in jail.”

The girls came downstairs early and asked Mr. Drew what he thought of the idea.

“It’s a good one,” he said, smiling. “You may as well see this mystery to its conclusion and you can stay in New York overnight with Nancy’s Aunt Eloise.”

Nancy, Bess, and George had visited Mr. Drew’s sister several times. They adored the school-teacher and she was always delighted to have them visit her.

“She hasn’t left for school yet,” said Nancy. “Suppose I call her right away.”

Nancy had a long talk with her aunt, who was amazed to hear about the case and pleased that the girls were coming.

“I’d love to see you,” she said.

As soon as Nancy had eaten breakfast, she phoned the River Heights airport and made a reservation for the three girls on a flight to New York that afternoon. Bess and George went home to get their clothes and Nancy picked them up later. She planned to leave her car at the airport parking lot.

After the girls had purchased their tickets and obtained seat reservations, they sat down to chat. Nancy said, “I’d like to find out how Ira Nixon is and tell him where we’re going.”

She went off to a phone booth. To her delight she found that Ira Nixon was feeling better and decided not to disturb him with any

worry about his brother.

As she left the booth, a young woman walked up to her. “You’re Nancy Drew, aren’t you? I’ve seen your picture in the paper lots of times.”

Nancy acknowledged that she was.

“I’ve just come from the powder room,” said the young woman. “A friend of yours is in there. She saw you come into the airport. She is terribly ill and asked me if I’d go and find you and bring you back there.”

Nancy looked at her watch. Only twenty minutes to plane time!

“All right,” she said.

The two hurried to the powder room. Nancy could see no one inside.

“Over here,” her companion said, and led Nancy around a corner.

The next instant the strange woman opened her purse and whipped a handkerchief from a plastic bag. She grabbed Nancy around the neck and held the handkerchief tight over the girl’s nose and mouth. It had a peculiar sickish odor.

Nancy struggled to free herself, but within seconds she blacked out.

CHAPTER XX

Shattered Bells

"I WONDER what could be keeping Nancy?" said Bess nervously when her friend did not reappear. "Our plane leaves in ten minutes."

"We'd better hunt for her," George suggested. "Maybe she's waiting for us at the gate."

Nancy was not at the gate, nor was she in any of the telephone booths.

"She has the tickets, so I'm sure she wouldn't go without us," Bess remarked. "Let's look in the powder room."

The cousins hurried to it. At first they did not see Nancy, but when Bess peered into the nursery, she gasped. Her friend was lying under a crib, covered with a blanket!

"What's the matter with her? Bess asked, frightened.

"I think she's been drugged," George said grimly.

The girls uncovered Nancy and shook her. She did not respond. Quickly they rolled the crib aside and put Nancy on a couch. Bess rushed to get a towel, held it under the cold water, and put it on Nancy's forehead. George chafed her wrists and gently slapped her cheeks. Finally Nancy opened her eyes.

"What happened to you?" Bess asked.

Nancy blinked and took several deep breaths, but did not answer.

"Maybe we'd better call a doctor and forget the trip," said Bess.

Her statement seemed to rouse Nancy to consciousness. "No, no," she said weakly. "Help me up and I'll be all right."

The girls did not question her further. They knew, without being told, that once more Edgar Nixon had tried to intervene in Nancy's plans and keep her from following him. They were more convinced of this than ever when they found her handbag intact.

Supporting Nancy, the two girls managed to walk her to the plane and onto it. By the time she reached her seat, the dazed girl declared she felt better, and whispered to her friends what had happened.

"We guessed as much," George replied. "Now just take it easy until we reach New York."

Nancy dozed during most of the trip, but by the time they set down at the airport, she declared she was all right.

"This is really proving to be a dangerous mission," the young sleuth said. "Are you both sure you want to carry on?"

"Of course we do," said George. "But I have a suggestion for you."

George felt that it might be wise for Nancy to try disguising herself.

Bess suggested, "You have on a reversible coat. You can turn it inside out, and tie a scarf over your hair and wear sunglasses."

"All right. I'll do it," Nancy replied.

As soon as the three girls got into a taxi to transfer them from LaGuardia Airport to Kennedy Airport, Nancy took off her coat, turned it inside out, and put it back on. The paisley pattern scarf which she had been carrying in a pocket was tied around her head, so only her face showed. Just before stepping from the cab in front of the airline building, she put on her sunglasses.

George said, "I never finished telling you my idea. Nancy, pretend you've never met Bess and me. You run ahead and do your sleuthing. We'll follow at a discreet distance."

Nancy said she would go to the ticket counter, while the other girls watched the passport desk for Edgar Nixon and Nancy Smith Drew.

"Okay, and if one of us finds out something, we'll raise our handbag in the air as a signal."

By this time Nancy was feeling her normal self and went at once to the airline counter. "Have Mr. Nixon and Miss Drew checked in yet?" she asked.

The clerk consulted his list. "No."

Nancy took a seat nearby where she could watch the arriving travelers. Several who were making the flight to London came to the counter but none was either Edgar Nixon or Nancy Smith Drew.

She was beginning to feel discouraged, when a couple hurried toward the long bench where she was seated. The man told the young woman to sit down and he hurried off to the counter.

"He certainly looks like Edgar Nixon," Nancy thought excitedly.

As she continued to stare at him, she caught a glimpse of a cuff link. It was red with a black star in the center. Instantly Nancy recalled what Mr. Whittier, the River Heights jeweler, had told her—that the man who had purchased a lovely pin for Nancy Drew had bought red cuff links like these for himself!

"I'm sure he's Edgar Nixon!" Nancy decided, and nonchalantly raised her handbag into the air to alert Bess and George.

She now turned her eyes toward the young woman. Was she the English heiress? Was she married?

Nancy's heart began to beat faster as the woman started to take off her gloves. She wore no wedding ring!

Taking a chance that she had spotted the person for whom she had been searching, Nancy moved over and sat down beside her.

"Pardon me, but aren't you Miss Nancy Smith Drew?" she asked.

The young woman jumped in surprise. "Yes, I am. Do I know you?" she asked.

"No, but first of all let me tell you that my name is also Nancy Drew. I must talk to you quickly. Did you ever receive a letter from England telling you that you have inherited a small fortune?"

"Why, no!" the amazed young woman exclaimed. "How did you know about this?"

"Because the letter came to me by mistake and I have been trying for weeks to find you."

"Do you have the letter with you?"

Nancy shook her head. "It was stolen. Miss Drew, it's a long story, but before I tell you everything, I must know this. Is the man with you Edgar Nixon?"

"Yes."

"You're not married to him?"

"No, not yet. He wanted to marry me right away and take me to England for a honeymoon, but I told him we would have to wait until we get to London. Even though I have no near relatives, I thought it would seem more like home to marry there."

Nancy took hold of one of Miss Drew's hands and looked straight into her eyes. "I'm dreadfully sorry to have to tell you this. You must not marry Edgar Nixon. He's wanted by the police for robbery and using the mails to defraud victims in a phony Lonely Hearts Club."

The actress gasped "I don't believe it!"

Nancy glanced up toward Bess and George. Both were holding up their handbags and looking toward the counter. Two men had approached Edgar Nixon.

"Look over there, Miss Drew," Nancy said. "Those are plainclothesmen arresting Edgar Nixon."

All the color drained from the actress's face, but she got up when Nancy did and walked with her to the counter.

They were just in time to hear one of the policemen say, "You're under arrest!"

As Edgar Nixon loudly protested, Nancy stepped forward.

"I'm Nancy Drew from River Heights," she introduced herself. Bess and George came up and confirmed the statement. Nancy went on, "I also accuse this man. He tried to harm me so that I could not frustrate his plans."

The other plainclothesman said that he had arranged for the use of an office in the airport so that they might talk in private. The two policemen marched Edgar Nixon toward it and the others followed. Miss Nancy Smith Drew, trembling, clung to Nancy.

"I know this is dreadful for you," the young detective told her, "but as soon as the shock is over, you will be grateful that you were saved from a very unhappy marriage."

During the conference that followed, all of Edgar Nixon's unsavory schemes were brought out. He admitted having had two men to help him and a girl who had become a friend through his Lonely Hearts Club.

"Why did you steal the letters from your brother's mailbag?" Nancy asked him.

A sneer came over the prisoner's face. He gave a little laugh as he answered. "Tell your father his Mrs. Quigley is a gabby client. She joined my Lonely Hearts Club. The old gal sent me letters five pages long and told me all her business. So I knew exactly when the money was being mailed to Mr. Drew, and—well, I figured I needed it more than she did.

"I was hiding and waiting for a chance to take the letter from Ira, when you stopped in your car and told him you'd give him cocoa at your house. That was my chance."

Edgar said that getting the Nancy Smith Drew letter was pure accident, but he had instantly planned to benefit by it. One of his club members had sent him an Emerson newspaper. In it was an item that

the actress was coaching a play at the college. When he read Mr. Bates-Jones's letter, Edgar had hurried to Emerson to make her acquaintance and a couple of days later asked her to marry him.

All this time, Nixon had not looked at his fiancée who was on the verge of tears. He made no apologies to her, and when questioned by Nancy, he said he had intended to keep the knowledge of her inheritance from Miss Drew until after they were married.

"Do you have the thousand dollars with you that you took from your brother?" Nancy asked the prisoner suddenly.

Taken off guard, Edgar Nixon whipped out his wallet and threw it at the girl. "Take this to the old miser," he shouted hysterically. "He never did treat me like a brother."

Nancy looked in the wallet. Besides the money, there were two plane tickets to London.

As Edgar was led away, Nancy Smith Drew burst into tears. "What a fool I've been!" she sobbed. "First I walked out on those fine boys in the Drama Club because of Edgar. But I did peek in at their show before taking the things in my locker. And I never said good-by properly to Mrs. Roderick.

"Edgar kept urging me to hurry with my packing and wouldn't let me write a thank-you note. But while he was carrying my bags down, I managed to scribble a few verses that had a message in them. Edgar didn't know what they meant."

"Nancy figured them out," Bess said proudly.

Miss Drew turned her tear-stained face toward Nancy. "You've been so wonderful. But," she added sadly, "there'll be no wedding bells for me and I had counted on my marriage so much. Oh dear, I don't know what to do!"

As Nancy thought of an appropriate answer, she suddenly realized that this mystery which she had enjoyed so much was coming to a close. The young detective always felt a vacuum in her life when this happened. But the feeling was not to last long. In a short time she would be working on another case, *Sign of the Twisted Candles.*

Nancy put an arm around the actress. "I'll tell you what you should do, Miss Drew," she said, smiling. "Take one of these plane tickets and go to England tonight!"

"Oh, do you think I should?"

Bess and George backed Nancy up in urging the actress to go. "You can have a wonderful time," Bess said, "and forget all your troubles."

Finally Nancy Smith Drew said, “You dear girls, I can never thank you enough.” Then she began to quote from Shakespeare:

“ ‘But love is blind, and lovers
cannot see
The pretty follies that themselves
commit.’ ”

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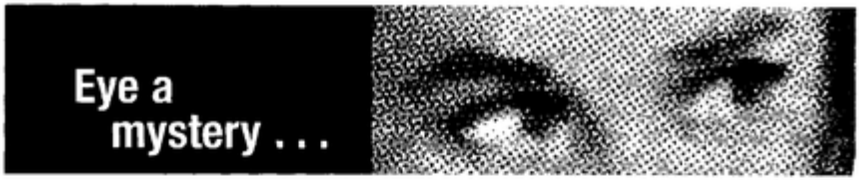

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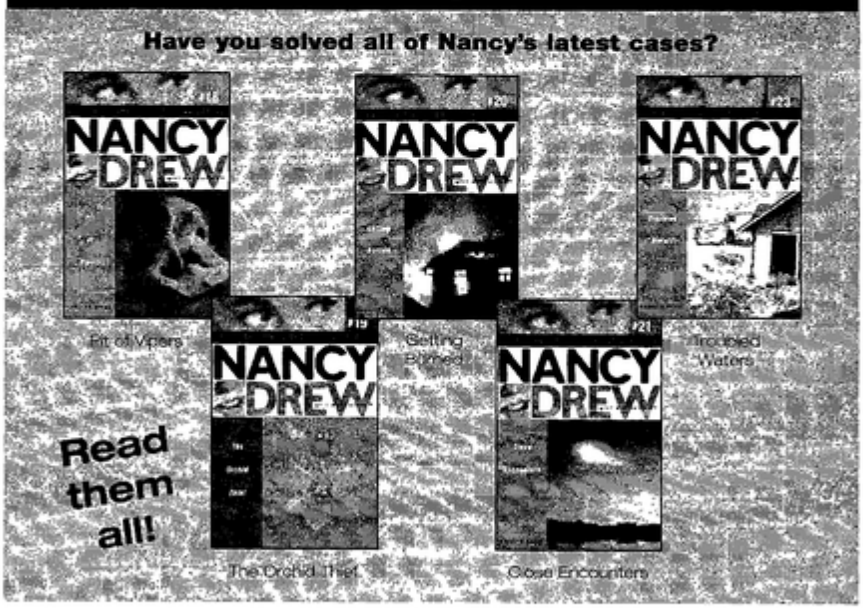

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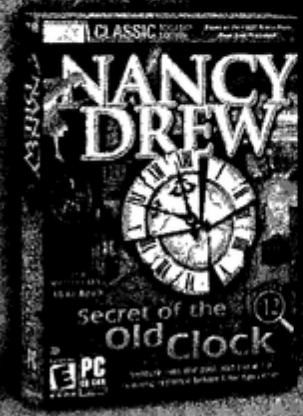

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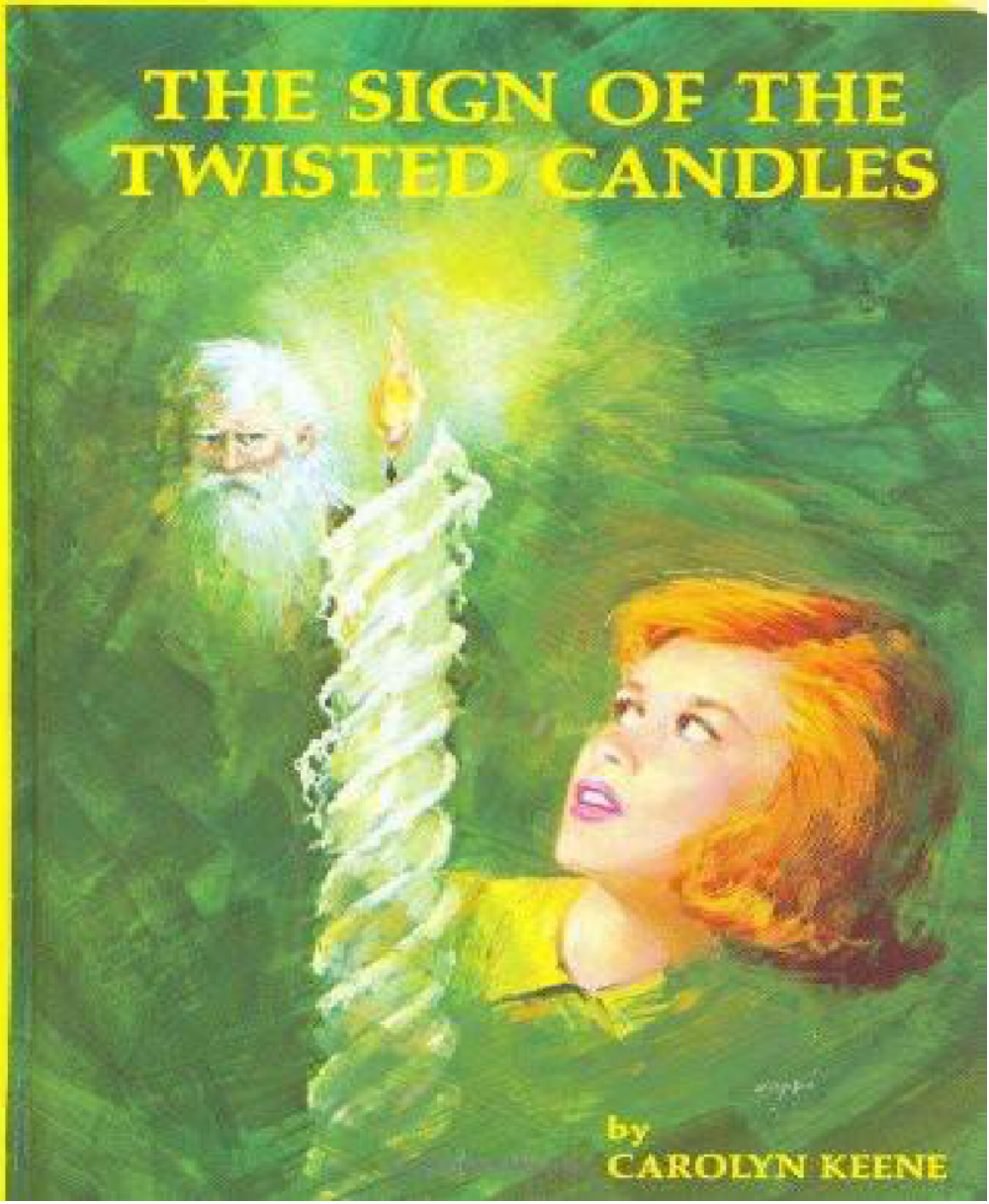

by CAROLYN KEENE

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Mr. Drew reached out to rescue Nancy

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CHAPTER I

The Tower Room

"OH, Nancy, this is like a hurricane! We'll be blown off the road!" cried Bess Marvin.

"We'd better try to go on," Nancy Drew told the worried girl beside her in the convertible.

"Yes," said George Fayne, the other girl with them. "A tree might fall on us. I'll bet this wind is a hundred miles an hour!"

Bess, her cousin, shuddered. "No mystery is worth our taking this chance."

The three friends were headed for a secluded inn called The Sign of the Twisted Candles. The Marvin family and the Faynes were related to a very old man who lived there. Rumors had recently come from neighbors of theirs who had overheard a conversation at the inn that he was virtually a prisoner in the tower of the old-fashioned mansion.

Bess and George had never been there and had asked attractive, titian-haired Nancy to drive out to investigate the rumors. If there was a mystery, it would be a challenge to Nancy, affectionately called by her friends "our detective." It had been agreed that the girls' mission to the inn would be kept secret from its occupants.

"It's our mothers' uncle we're going to see. His name is Asa Sidney," said George. "He owns the place, but turned over the management of it a few years ago to a couple named Jemitt."

Trees and bushes swayed in the wind, which had blown up suddenly and now shrieked like a siren. It slammed against the car with terrific force as dust and leaves swirled through the air.

"Oh!" Bess screamed suddenly. "Look!"

Not far ahead of the car a giant elm had started to topple. As Nancy jammed on her brakes, the tree fell with a thundering crash across the road.

The three girls sat stunned, but finally Bess said, "Now we'll have to turn around and go home."

"Don't be silly," said George. "I can see the inn just beyond the tree.

We can walk there."

Nancy drove up to the tree, which might offer protection for the car against the storm's blast. She and her friends stepped out into the wind, which whipped their hair and stung their faces. With eyes almost closed, they locked arms, skirted the fallen tree, and set off for the inn.

Nancy jammed on her brakes

Progress was slow, but finally they came to the inn's spacious front

lawn and curving driveway at the end of the road. Several cars were parked there. The building was a rambling structure in three sections. Its central portion was two stories high and had a flat-roofed tower room. Wings on either side were one story and also flat-roofed.

There was a dim glow of light from the ground-floor windows. In the arched casement of the tower a sturdy candlelight gleamed a welcome. Almost breathless, the three girls dashed up the broad front steps onto the wide porch just as it started to rain.

George glanced at the parked cars and remarked with a grin, “I wonder what their drivers will say when they see that fallen tree across the road.”

“They’ll be wild,” Bess prophesied, and added, “I’m sure I look a fright.” She ran her fingers through her tousled, blond hair.

George, a brunette with short hair, remarked, “Who wouldn’t, when we’ve just barely escaped being blown into space!”

Nancy led the way to the door and opened it. The three girls found themselves in a long hall, lighted only by electric sconces on the walls. The candle bulbs in them were large and twisted.

To the left and right arched doorways opened into high-ceilinged rooms where tables, each with a similar candle, were set in rows. Half a dozen couples looked up curiously as the girls entered, then resumed eating.

From a doorway in the rear of the hall a woman wearing a black dress with a small, frilled white apron approached Nancy and her friends.

“Good afternoon,” Nancy said. “We’d like to have some tea and cinnamon toast, and stay here until the storm dies down.”

The woman, a gaunt, thin-lipped person past middle age, nodded her head.

“Just take any table,” she replied.

“Is there a room where we can comb our hair?” Nancy asked.

The woman nodded. “Go to the head of the stairs. You’ll see a powder room there.”

The girls climbed the creaky staircase to the upper hall and opened the door marked Ladies. They washed their hands, then began to comb their hair. Suddenly they heard an angry masculine voice outside the door.

“Where do you think you’re going with that?”

Nancy, alert to any clue in the mystery at the inn, turned to her friends, fingers to her lips. A girl's voice replied, but the three visitors had difficulty hearing what was said because of the roaring wind.

"He's one hundred today, so I thought you wouldn't mind—"

"It's too much!" shouted the man. "Take that tray back! There are three young ladies just in to be fed. Get downstairs and help. And be quick about it!"

"But on his hundredth birthday—" the girl protested.

"No back talk! I'll take something to the tower later."

Nancy and her friends were startled by the crash of glass on the first floor and assumed that the wind had blown in several panes. Quick footsteps indicated the man was running down the steps.

The door of the powder room creaked on its hinges and slowly opened inward. Hesitatingly a slender girl of about sixteen came into view. She seemed to be dazed and frightened. Was it from fear of the storm or of the man?

Like the woman who had greeted them, the girl wore a black dress with a frilled white apron. Clenched in her hands was a tray. A bouquet of flowers and several dishes of food were in imminent danger of sliding to the floor.

"Here, let me take that," Nancy said quickly.

"Oh! Who—?"

The girl gave a faint scream and swayed. Nancy seized the tray, thrust it into the hands of the amazed Bess, then put an arm about the girl's quivering form.

As Bess and George regarded the frightened girl with pity, Nancy led her to a couch and gently urged her to sit down.

"Just take it easy," she said. "I think the wind is dying down a little. Maybe there won't be any more trouble."

The girl sank down obediently. "No more trouble?" she muttered.

Then suddenly she leaped to her feet. "Oh, what am I thinking of?" she cried out. "I—I must go! At once! The twisted candles—"

"The twisted candles?" Nancy repeated.

"Yes, I should help him light them. It's getting dark."

Nancy, Bess, and George exchanged sideways glances, then Nancy asked, "He? The man who was in the hall?"

"Oh, no, the one who lives in the tower. He's a dear old man, but—" The girl stopped speaking and looked into space.

After a pause she went on, "I'll be right down to serve you." But she lingered as if wanting to tell something else.

When she remained silent, Nancy said, "I'm Nancy Drew. These are my friends Bess Marvin and George Fayne." On purpose she slurred the last names so the girl could not repeat them.

"I'm Carol Wipple," the waitress replied. "I—I must do what the Jemitts say. I can't stand here talking. I must get to work, or else—"

"Or else what?" Nancy asked. "In the excitement no one will miss you for a few minutes."

George spoke up. "If I were you, Carol, I'd take the tray upstairs. The man in the tower has to eat."

"I'd like to, but I don't dare," Carol said, her eyes widening with fear. "I was forbidden."

Nancy saw a chance to do some sleuthing. Perhaps *she* could go to the tower. "But this tray of food—it'll go to waste," she said. "It's for Mr.—"

"Mr. Asa Sidney. He lives alone in the tower room. He's one hundred years old today."

Nancy smiled. "I should like to meet a man one hundred years old. And I certainly think he deserves a party on his birthday—a real celebration."

"Mr. Jemitt thinks it is too expensive a trayful," Carol said. "You see, Mr. Sidney lets my foster parents, Frank and Emma Jemitt, use this property in exchange for taking care of him. I don't know why I'm telling you girls all this."

"You're not to worry," Nancy said firmly. "I'll pay for the food on the tray, and I'll carry it up and serve it myself."

"Oh, would you do that?" Carol cried happily.

From somewhere downstairs a voice thundered, "Carol! Where are you?"

"Oh, I must go!" Carol said, and darted from the room.

"Nancy, you old dear," Bess said affectionately. "You're always putting yourself out to be kind to others."

"And you did a great bit of sleuthing," George remarked. "I'd like to meet Asa Sidney, but Mr. Jemitt might become suspicious if we all

barge in on him."

"That's right," said Bess. "Nancy, why don't you go alone?"

"Okay, but I'll try to work out something so you girls can come up too."

Bess and George said they would share the expense of Mr. Sidney's dinner, then went down to the dining room. Nancy climbed the stairs, carrying the tray. The stairway was unlighted, and the swaying tree branches made queer-shaped shadows on the walls. The door above was closed.

"A perfect setting for a spooky mystery," Nancy thought. "The biggest problem right now is how I'm going to knock on the door, with both hands balancing this tray!"

She reached the top of the stairway and stood in front of the heavy paneled door. A dim light showed beneath it, but no sound came from the other side.

"I'll just tap on the door with my foot," Nancy decided.

Leaning against the doorframe, she tapped with one heel. To her surprise the door swung silently open. Evidently the lock had not caught fast.

Nancy gazed into one of the strangest rooms she had ever seen. It was fully twenty feet square, and from all of its walls candles gleamed —candles by the dozen, all winking in the draft from the open door. Evidently Mr. Sidney had not waited for Carol to light them.

It was warm in the room, and the heavy air was pungently scented by burning tallow. In the great arched window directly in front of Nancy was the massive twisted candle whose light she had seen from outdoors.

From a low, broad chair before this window, the gaunt figure of a very old man arose. The candlelight showed his long, silver-white hair sweeping over stooped shoulders, and merging with the snowy beard that spread across his chest. Shaggy white eyebrows half concealed glowing eyes—strangely youthful eyes—that peered at Nancy from either side of a jutting, hawklike nose.

"Good evenng," she said. "I have brought your dinner."

The old man stretched out his bony, trembling arms. In a deep, husky voice that faltered as he spoke, Asa Sidney cried out:

"Jenny—my Jenny, you've come back to me!"

CHAPTER II

Trouble Ahead

NANCY looked at Asa Sidney with deep perplexity, wondering who Jenny was.

"I think you're mistaken," she said, smiling. "I'm Nancy Drew, and this is the first time I've ever been here.... Oh, how very odd!"

She set the tray down on a bench and gazed at a portrait over the fireplace. It was a fine oil painting of a titian-haired young woman who resembled Nancy. She realized that in the flickering candlelight she must look very much like the person in the portrait.

"I—I must have been dreaming," Asa Sidney murmured, dropping his arms and shaking his head. "Well, well," he continued, "that's all we old folks have left. If it were not for our dreams, we should be poor indeed."

Nancy was silent, not certain just what reply, if any, was expected from her.

"However," Asa Sidney went on, looking at her with a smile, "you were a very lovely vision as you entered the room. While drowsing, I seemed to see my dear wife step down from the picture up there. If I can't tell a very pretty and very much alive young woman from an old piece of canvas and paint, then I shall have to visit an oculist."

Nancy chuckled. "May I congratulate you on your hundredth birthday?" she said. "Carol fixed this tray for you."

Asa Sidney laughed a little bitterly. "Pardon me, my dear," he said, sitting down again. "I'm afraid I've become a lonely, cross old hermit. Carol is a good girl, a very thoughtful young person, to remember a date that means nothing to anybody else."

"Surely it is worth while to celebrate one's hundredth birthday," Nancy remarked. "Why, your name should be in the papers, and your picture, too."

"No, no," protested the old man. "That's all vanity and display. Why should I be honored for my existence? I haven't tried to live longer than anyone else. I've read interviews in the newspapers. The

reporters always ask the centenarians how they managed to live so long. One old codger will say he got to be a hundred because he never ate meat, and another will say he attributes his old age to the fact that he never ate anything but meat!"

Asa Sidney gave a mirthless laugh. "The only reason I have lived to be a hundred is because I have not died!"

Nancy shuddered a little. Plainly Mr. Sidney was far from happy.

"You must have many visitors," Nancy suggested.

"No," the old man said sadly, "not a soul ever comes to see me."

Nancy knew this was not true. She asked, "Are you sure?"

"Of course. The Jemitts have told me."

The young detective decided not to pursue the subject. It might upset the old man to learn that Bess and George's relatives had been told Asa Sidney would see no one.

She said abruptly, *"I'd* like to celebrate your birthday. Two darling friends of mine are downstairs. May we have tea up here with you as a sort of birthday party? Perhaps Carol will join us."

Mr. Sidney looked startled. "What did you say your name is?"

"Nancy Drew. My father is Carson Drew, the attorney."

"An attorney, eh?" Asa Sidney paused. "Well, Nancy, bring up your young friends. Tell Jemitt to send us the best food in the inn, and say I will pay what exceeds my usual portion."

"You are very kind, Mr. Sidney," said Nancy, "but it is not necessary to do that."

The old man's conversation strengthened Nancy's growing suspicion that the Jemitts, for reasons of their own, wanted to keep the old man a virtual prisoner. She sped down the stairs and joined George and Bess.

"There you are at last!" Bess cried. "I've almost died sitting here being polite, while all the time this was teasing me."

"This" proved to be a plateful of golden cinnamon toast from which Bess lifted the cover.

"Wait a minute!" Nancy cried.

"Wait a minute? Oh, Nancy!" Bess protested.

In a whisper the young detective told of her visit to the tower. Her friends' eyes opened wide in surprise at what she had learned.

"We're going to have dinner up there," Nancy announced. "I'll call Hannah, and she can phone your parents."

She rang a little bell on the table, and Carol came to answer.

"Carol," said Nancy, "all of us are going to have a birthday dinner with Mr. Sidney. He invited us."

"Oh!" the young waitress exclaimed. "I'm afraid—"

As Nancy took hold of Carol's hand, she wondered, "Does Jemitt have *everybody* intimidated?" Aloud she said, "Please tell Mr. Jemitt to come here."

Jemitt was a tall, rather heavy-set man, slightly bald. "Yes, miss?" the manager asked, his voice purring as he bowed to Nancy.

"We've decided to have a more substantial meal," Nancy said. "Of course we'll pay for the tea and toast."

Jemitt bowed more deeply.

"We'll have jellied consommé, sliced breast of chicken, hearts of lettuce with Roquefort dressing, nut bread, ice cream, chocolate layer cake, and fruit punch," Nancy said, mentioning the items that had been on Carol's tray for Mr. Sidney.

"That sounds good to me," murmured Bess, and George nodded in agreement.

The man bowed and replied, "I shall hurry your orders, miss."

"One thing more," Nancy said. "We want this meal served in the tower room with Mr. Sidney, and I should like very much to have you give permission for Carol to join us."

The suave, sleek Jemitt bristled. "What is the meaning of this? What do you know of the tower room? I—why—who are you?"

"It doesn't matter." Nancy smiled. "We wish to celebrate Mr. Sidney's birthday and he would like us to eat with him. We'll pay for our dinner and also for the tray Carol fixed for him."

Nancy's outspoken manner seemed to intimidate the man. He bowed again and left the room.

George grinned. "Nancy, you sure took him by surprise."

Nancy smiled. "Now I'll phone Hannah, then take you girls up and introduce you to Mr. Sidney."

The line was busy, however, so she led her friends toward the stairs.

Carol came toward them. "How did you ever persuade Mr. Jemitt to

let me join you?" she whispered. "He's furious, but he doesn't dare offend a patron or lose a big order."

"I'm glad he thinks I'm a worthwhile customer," Nancy answered with a wink.

As she climbed to the tower, Nancy was thoughtful. Carol was evidently browbeaten and unhappy. Was this part of the mystery at the old inn? Yet there seemed to be a bond between the thin, timid girl and Asa Sidney—a bond which the Jemitts did not approve.

Nancy had arrived at no conclusion when the girls reached the door of the tower room and knocked. Bess and George gave a little start when they saw the ghostly room and its elderly occupant.

"I'm afraid you'll find this strange tower of mine scarcely prepared for your delightful visit," Mr. Sidney said with quaint courtesy. "However, you are most welcome."

Bess and George gazed at the twisted candles that gleamed everywhere. Along one side stood a wide couch which evidently served the recluse as a bed. On the opposite wall were framed patent grants for things he had invented.

One entire side of the room was occupied by an open charcoal furnace and a worktable. On the table stood pots, pans, dye vats, bars of tallow and beeswax, and rows of pewter candle molds. Nancy introduced her friends merely as Bess and George, and was glad when Mr. Sidney did not ask for their last names.

The cousins were silent, obviously awed by the strange surroundings and the remarkable spectacle the old man made as he moved about the room. The candlelight gave an aura of glowing silver to his mass of hair. He kept scoffing at himself for being slow and clumsy.

"Oh, I'm forgetting my phone call!" Nancy exclaimed. "The line was busy when I tried it before." She had noted there was no phone in the tower. Therefore Mr. Sidney did not have this means of communicating with the outside world.

As Nancy went down the stairway, now dimly lighted with wall candles, she heard someone ascending. It was Jemitt, grumbling under his breath and carrying a large covered tray. A few steps behind came Carol, similarly burdened.

"Ah, miss, I'll be ready for you in a moment," Jemitt said pleasantly.

"I'm going down to phone," Nancy explained.

She closed herself into the booth. In a moment Hannah Gruen, the

warmhearted, efficient housekeeper of the Drew household, answered.

"Hello. This is Nancy."

"Thank goodness you called," Hannah said. "I was getting worried. Did you find the place?"

"Oh, yes, it's very quaint. I'll tell you about it when I get home. Bess and George and I are having dinner here. Will you please call their parents for them."

"Glad to. But I want to know, did you speak to their relative?"

"Yes. I must go now."

"Tell me first, what's his name?"

"Sidney—Asa Sidney. It's his birth—"

"Asa Sidney!" Hannah cried out. "Oh, Nancy, now you're in for trouble!"

Click!

The line suddenly went dead, and although Nancy tried for five minutes to have the connection restored, she was unsuccessful. Evidently the wind had blown down some wires.

Nancy climbed the stairs, more puzzled than ever. How could old Asa Sidney make trouble for her?

CHAPTER III

The Feud

"COME and sit down, my dear! The celebration has already begun," old Mr. Sidney greeted Nancy as she re-entered the tower room.

"I'm sorry to have been so long," Nancy remarked as she sat down in the rocking chair.

"Jemitt has made some excellent fruit punch," he told her.

"Then I propose a toast to you, Mr. Sidney," Nancy said, lifting her glass high. "Happy Birthday!"

The four girls rose to their feet and sang the familiar birthday song. Tears of happiness glistened in the eyes of the old man, and even his beard could not conceal the pleased smile that spread over his face.

"Thank you, thank you," he murmured.

The candlelight sparkled on the silver and china, and Bess and George relaxed in the gaiety of the birthday party. Even Carol's timidity seemed to vanish.

Nancy, Bess, and George each told a humorous story, and Mr. Sidney laughed in delight. Finally Nancy asked him about candle making.

"It began in England," the old man replied as he finished his cake. "I was born in Liverpool-on-Tyne. When I was still a boy I went to work for a chandler—a man who makes candles."

"Was the work hard?" Bess asked.

"For the first year I carried wood and stoked the fires which melted the tallow," Mr. Sidney said. "It was hot work and the hours were long. Then I was promoted to stirring and skimming the hot grease. Under an arrangement with my parents, I was to live with my employer until I was eighteen. At that time I was to receive a new suit of clothes, some money, and a certificate to prove I was a journeyman chandler.

"It's not boasting to say that I learned quickly, and when I was fifteen I developed my first invention. I invented a candle that was pierced lengthwise by four holes, down which the melted tallow ran,

instead of spilling over the candlestick. In this way it was saved, to be burned when the candle grew shorter. My employer made a good profit on that. I received nothing."

George said sympathetically, "How unjust!"

"It was, so I decided to run away. I had only the clothes I wore and no money, but I, was determined to get to America," Mr. Sidney explained. "I offered to work my way across the ocean, and the captain of a freighter agreed to give me passage in exchange for labor as a helper in the galley.

"The ship ran into terrible storms and it took months to get to New York. Our drinking water ran low. I can tell you we were mighty glad to reach America and drop anchor.

"I soon found steady work making candles," Asa Sidney went on. "When I had a little money laid aside I opened my own shop, married, and had three children.

"Evenings I experimented with improvements on candles and—and I guess I neglected my children and my wife."

The white head bowed and a tremor ran through the old man's body. The girls remained respectfully silent.

"Eventually I invented the twisted candle which brought me fame and fortune."

At the phrase "fame and fortune" Nancy said to herself, "So this man, despite his surroundings, is no doubt wealthy." Her eyes roved around the room. A small ornate wooden chest under a low table caught her attention. Carved on the top were several twisted candles. There was a name-plate: *Private property of Asa Sidney.*

At the moment the old man was saying, "But fame and fortune did not help solve my problem. My little girl died and my wife and boys left me here alone. I never heard from them again. But years later I learned all of them had died. The boys had never married, so I have no descendants. I had a brother, though, who also came to America, but he has passed away."

"I'm terribly sorry," said Nancy, and Bess and George expressed their sympathy.

"Men should be content," Mr. Sidney said. "If they let success make them greedy, they lose the happiness money can't buy."

"But surely," Bess spoke up, "a successful man owes it to the world to use his talents for the general good."

"It was pride that urged me on, not a desire to better the world," the old man said.

Mr. Sidney's grief was so apparent that Nancy rose from her chair and put a hand on his quivering shoulder. "I'm sorry if we have revived sorrowful memories. Please don't be so sad."

"Sad? I'm doomed to be the saddest mortal on earth. Instead of a pleasant home, with my relatives coming to see me, I have lived to watch a feud. There is greed where there should be affection, and envy where there should be love!"

Nancy glanced at Bess and George, who shrugged. Apparently they had never been told about the feud.

Asa Sidney sat up straight and looked about him. "You must pardon me, my dears, for inflicting a half century of sorrow upon you. This is no way to repay your kindness. Is there any fruit punch left? Let us drink to the new world of electronics, spaceships, and trips to the moon—but always soft candlelight. Salute!"

All drained their glasses of fruit punch, Bess looking wistfully at the maraschino cherry which obstinately remained in the bottom of her glass.

Nancy saw that the old man was tiring and said they must go. As she rose from her chair, they all heard a bloodcurdling shriek from outdoors. Nancy rushed to the window and looked down. She could see no one, but in a moment Jemitt rushed from the inn and gazed about. Apparently he was puzzled too.

"I must go," Carol said quickly and hurried downstairs.

The other girls said good night to Mr. Sidney and followed. By the time they reached the first floor, Jemitt was coming back inside.

"What happened?" Nancy asked.

"Search me," he replied. "Some crazy woman just trying out her lungs, I guess. Did you enjoy your dinner?"

"It was delicious. How much do I owe you?"

The manager named an amount and Nancy paid the bill.

As the girls went to the front porch, Carol came from the garden, saying she had not seen the woman who screamed. "I hope she wasn't injured."

Nancy was suspicious about the whole episode. Had Jemitt been eavesdropping at the tower room door, afraid Asa Sidney might say something to his visitors which would make them feel he was being

mistreated? To get the girls away, had he ordered some woman, probably Mrs. Jemitt, to scream? If so, the ruse had worked!

Nancy did not express her thoughts aloud. Instead, she gave Carol a quick kiss and said, “Remember, my dad is a lawyer. If he or I can be of service to you, please let me know.”

“I hope to see you again and often,” Carol answered shyly, “even though I can’t imagine myself needing legal advice.”

Nancy, Bess, and George walked along the driveway to the road and set off for the convertible. The wind had died down but had left trees uprooted and branches snapped off.

They found Nancy’s car undamaged and climbed in. She turned on the headlights and had just backed around when a car roared up the road and stopped short at the fallen tree. The driver almost scraped the fender of Nancy’s car. He leaned out and asked curtly why she was blocking the road.

“Great-Uncle Peter!” George exclaimed. “Hello, Uncle Pete!”

“Who—what—George! And Bess, too? Yes, it is. What are you girls doing here?”

The man leaped from his car and strode toward them, his face plainly showing annoyed surprise.

“We haven’t seen you in a couple of years,” Bess called, trying to force a cheery note into her voice.

Nancy watched the little drama with wonder. She had never heard of Great-Uncle Peter.

“You haven’t answered my question. Why are you two here?” the man demanded.

“We were caught in the storm and stopped at The Sign of the Twisted Candles,” George replied. “This is our friend, Nancy Drew. Our Great-Uncle, Nancy. Mr. Peter Boonton.”

Peter Boonton, a tall, thin man about sixty, nodded acknowledgment of the introduction.

“Well, run along now,” he admonished his nieces. “It is late for you girls to be so far from home.” He turned on his heel and started toward the inn on foot.

“Whew!” George exclaimed. “What a greeting! Nancy, the plot thickens. Great-Uncle Peter must have come to see Asa Sidney. Well, let’s go!”

Before Nancy could start, another car whizzed up the road and screeched to a halt.

"This place has become very popular all of a sudden," Bess remarked.

Since the newcomer was blocking the road, Nancy tapped her horn. Instead of moving, the driver sat staring at Peter Boonton's car. He called to Nancy, "Say, miss, do you know whose car that is? It looks like Pete Boonton's."

He stepped to the ground. The man appeared to be about the same age as Bess and George's great-uncle, but was heavier set.

"Yes, that's Pete's car all right," he declared emphatically. "See here, you aren't waiting for him by any chance, are you?"

"Certainly not," Nancy answered, gripping Bess's arm as a signal for silence. "We're just leaving, as a matter of fact."

"Don't let me keep you, then," the stranger said, leaning an elbow on Nancy's car. "Now that the owner of this place has hit the century mark, I suppose every relative of his or his wife is looking forward to a piece of his estate. They're worrying more about his money than his health, you can bet!" The man laughed loudly.

Here was added light on Asa Sidney's odd affairs, Nancy thought. She hoped the stranger would continue his musings.

"Yes sir! Two generations of bickering, and now—him! Well, Peter Boonton can't put anything over on me," the man muttered. "He's not a blood relative. There'll be a hot scene in the tower room tonight or I'm not Jacob Sidney!"

Bess and George gasped but said nothing. Nancy asked, "You are related to Asa Sidney?"

"Yes, my father was his brother. How do you know Asa?" he said, thrusting his face into Nancy's car. "Say, who are you?"

"Oh, I just met Mr. Sidney this evening," Nancy replied nonchalantly. "When I heard it was his hundredth birthday, I arranged a little party for him. Carol helped get it ready and ate with us."

"Carol! Humph! Asa thinks more of that girl than of his own flesh and blood."

"He seems to be very lonely," Nancy remarked pointedly. "He said so himself."

"Oh, he did, did he? And whom has he to blame for that?" Jacob Sidney shouted. "Cutting himself off from everybody and living in an

attic making twisted candles all the time. He's crazy, that's what he is.

"You can bet that I'm not crazy enough to let Pete Boonton fill the old man with gossip," he added, shaking his fist at the house. "The Sidneys didn't inherit any weakness in the head, and a Boonton never got the best of 'em yet!"

With that, the man dashed off to the inn.

CHAPTER IV

A Strange Story

As Nancy headed the car for River Heights, Bess and George began to talk excitedly.

"I wonder what the feud is about," said Bess. "It must be pretty bad."

George nodded and Nancy told them about Hannah Gruen's remark, "Now you're in for trouble." The cousins could not figure out what she had meant, but said they would ask their parents.

"We'll let you know, Nancy, what they say," Bess promised.

Heavy storm damage to trees and flooding along the roads made driving hazardous and it was late before Nancy reached her own home. Mr. Drew heard her pull into the garage and opened the kitchen door.

"Hi, Dad!" Nancy cried, kissing him.

"Hello, Nancy! How's the junior partner of Drew and Drew, Incorporated?" The tall, handsome lawyer laughed.

"Full of mystery," she replied. "Wait'll you hear what happened. Hi, Hannah!" she said to the sweet, motherly-looking housekeeper who had just finished putting away the dinner dishes. She had helped rear Nancy since she was three, when Mrs. Drew had died.

Nancy said, "Let's all go into the living room and exchange stories. Dad, build a nice cozy fire, will you? It's chilly."

Soon there was a roaring blaze in the fireplace and the three sat down. Hannah Gruen brought a cup of steaming cocoa and homemade cookies for Nancy, while she and Mr. Drew had second cups of coffee.

"First I'll tell my story," Nancy said, "then I want to hear about your warning, Hannah."

She was interrupted many times by her astonished listeners, and all three agreed that Mr. Jemitt's actions seemed very suspicious. Between him and the greedy relatives, Asa Sidney was in a bad spot.

Finally Mr. Drew said, "What were you saying about a warning?"

Nancy replied, “When I phoned Hannah, she said, ‘Asa Sidney! Now you’re in for trouble!’ Then the phone went dead. What did you mean, Hannah?”

“Well, it’s a long story,” Mrs. Gruen cautioned. “This isn’t serious trouble, but it may mean a heartache for you, Nancy. I’m afraid Bess’s and George’s parents didn’t intend that you find out about the family skeleton.”

“But,” Nancy protested, “they thought it was all right for Bess and George to take me to the inn to investigate.”

The housekeeper sighed. “You never can tell about people. Well, I’ll begin at the beginning. I heard this long ago from a woman who used to work for the Sidneys.” Hannah repeated the story Asa Sidney had told the girls and added, “Ever since the little girl’s death, the Boontons and the Sidneys have been enemies. The Boontons are mad at the Sidneys because Asa didn’t pay attention to his family, and the Sidneys are mad at the Boontons because Mrs. Sidney left her husband.”

“And Bess Marvin and George Fayne are related to the Boontons, aren’t they?” Mr. Drew inquired.

“Exactly! Mrs. Asa Sidney’s maiden name was Boonton.”

After Mrs. Gruen had explained the complicated family tree, Nancy remarked, “So Bess and George are great-grandnieces of old Asa Sidney!”

“That’s it.” Hannah nodded. “Mrs. Marvin and Mrs. Fayne didn’t expect you to find out all about the feud—only whether or not the Jemitts are mistreating Asa Sidney.”

Nancy laughed. “I’ll stick strictly to the Jemitt case.”

“Once,” said Mrs. Gruen, “there was some sort of reconciliation between a Boonton and a Sidney, and a marriage, I believe. But the feelings of both families were so bitter that they disowned the couple. I don’t know what happened to them.”

At that moment the telephone rang. Nancy leaped to her feet, hoping the call would be from Ned Nickerson, her favorite date.

Instead of Ned’s cheery baritone, the voice on the wire proved to be feminine. “Is this Nancy Drew?”

“Yes.”

“The Miss Drew who was at The Twisted Candles this afternoon during the storm?”

Nancy's pulse quickened. "Yes, I was there with two friends," she said. "Who is this?"

"Carol Wipple."

"Carol, I'm so glad to hear from you. I was just telling my father of our meeting, and telling him, too, that I hoped to visit you again soon."

"That's good of you, Nancy. I—you—your father's a lawyer, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Sidney wants a lawyer, a really good one, Nancy," Carol said. "Could your father come tomorrow morning to draw a new will for him?"

"I'm sure he'll come," said Nancy, "but let me ask him."

A moment later she had his promise and Carol was delighted. "Please come with him. I'll be waiting for you."

"I'll try," Nancy replied. She hurried back to her father. "May I go along?"

"Hm! This is strictly cut-and-dried legal business," Mr. Drew replied, "but then I might need a detective. Okay, come along."

Early the next morning father and daughter were riding southward on the state highway, with Nancy at the wheel of her convertible. The fallen tree had been removed, so she was able to drive directly to The Sign of the Twisted Candles.

"That's the tower room up there," Nancy pointed out. "And I see Carol sweeping the porch."

Carol looked up as the car swung into the driveway, and ran forward to greet Nancy. She acknowledged the introduction to Mr. Drew and thanked him for coming.

"Mr. Sidney is expecting you," she said. "Nancy, you'll show your father the way up, won't you? I must hurry with my work."

"Indeed I will," Nancy stated, opening the door. Then she leaned toward Carol and whispered, "Stay where I can find you. I'll be down in a minute."

Carol nodded and Nancy entered the hallway with her father.

Before they could proceed, Mrs. Jemitt popped into the hall. "You wish breakfast?" she said. "We don't usually serve this early." She gave no indication that she recognized Nancy.

"No, thank you," Mr. Drew answered. "I have a business appointment with Mr. Sidney."

Mrs. Jemitt jumped in front of the staircase. "You can't see him! He's—he's ill. He didn't sleep well."

"That's all the more reason why I should go up," the lawyer persisted.

Mrs. Jemitt was firm. She stretched out her arms to bar the way. "You'd better leave," she advised angrily.

Nancy was in a quandary. She knew her father would never touch the woman. If Mrs. Jemitt was to be forcibly removed from the stairway, she would have to do it!

CHAPTER V

Buried Chest

WITH the speed of a panther Nancy grabbed Mrs. Jemitt's arms and swung her around out of the way. Then, crying "Come on, Dad!" she ran up the steps two at a time.

Her father followed, leaving Mrs. Jemitt muttering below. Nancy rapped on the door of Asa Sidney's tower room. The old man called to them to enter.

"Ah, Miss Drew, I can't confuse you this bright morning with a musty old painting. Mr. Drew, how are you, sir? Please excuse me for not rising. I am somewhat weak today after a tempestuous night. Draw up a chair."

"Don't disturb yourself, Mr. Sidney." The lawyer placed his bulging brief case on the table and pulled a chair close to the old man's seat. "Mrs. Jemitt said you were ill."

Mr. Sidney frowned. "How would she know? She hasn't been near me nor has Jemitt. Carol brought up my breakfast.

"Well, let's get down to business. I wish to make a new will," the old man said. "Please understand that despite my dowdy surroundings, I am prepared to meet your fee, Mr. Drew. I want the best legal advice, and I can afford to pay for it."

Nancy stepped quietly from the room and closed the door behind her. She paused on the first step to glance out the small window that gave a minimum of light to the stairway. The corner of an old barn was visible. Beyond this was the edge of a forest that grew denser and taller as it stretched toward some hills.

A movement below attracted her attention. Frank Jemitt, dressed in overalls, was coming from the inn. He carried a shovel and a large covered basket which seemed to be very heavy, and kept looking around furtively.

"He certainly acts suspicious," Nancy thought.

Jemitt paused close to the barn, which was at the end of the property farthest from the road. The man looked about him, studied

the windows of the house carefully, and then began to dig quickly.

"He's going to bury something!" Nancy speculated.

The hole satisfied Jemitt before it was much more than eighteen inches deep and about as wide. He reached into the basket and took out a small chest.

Nancy gasped. She was sure it was the one marked *Private property of Asa Sidney* which she had seen in the tower room the preceding night!

The chest was about a foot square and eight or ten inches in depth. It was made of ebony and strengthened by brass straps and studs of the same material. Evidently Jemitt knew its contents were valuable.

"What's in it?" Nancy asked herself. "Valuable papers perhaps, or silver? Asa Sidney may have some fine old antique pieces."

Nancy was puzzled. If Jemitt was stealing the chest, why bury it? Why not take it away and sell the contents?

Jemitt dropped the box into the hole and dragged some logs over it from a nearby woodpile. Then he carefully scooped up all the earth dug from the hole, put it into his basket, and scattered it in the woods. Then he went toward the house.

"There's more going on at this place than one sees at a glance," Nancy thought. "I'm sure Asa Sidney didn't ask Jemitt to hide that chest." She continued on downstairs.

When Nancy reached the second floor, Carol was coming from one of the bedrooms. Evidently she had been waiting for Nancy.

"Hello," she said in a subdued voice.

“He certainly acts suspicious,” Nancy thought

Nancy sensed that Carol had something to tell her, but did not know how to begin. She gave the girl an opening.

"Mr. Sidney must have decided very suddenly to make a new will," she remarked.

"Hush!" Carol whispered, looking cautiously about. "I didn't say anything to Father or Mother Jemitt about it. I—I—Oh, Nancy, I'm so worried and upset."

"Why, Carol?" Nancy asked.

"I wish I could get it all straight in my mind." The girl sighed. "I love old Mr. Sidney. He's so friendless and pathetic.

"Last night, right after you left, a man came to see him—some relative who's been here before, usually late at night, but Father would never let him go upstairs. But this time he went up, anyway. A little while afterward, another man came and he too insisted upon going up.

"The most terrible argument broke out between the two men. We could hear them shouting way downstairs in the kitchen. Father Jemitt crept up and listened outside the door.

"The arguments would die down and then break out again. After about an hour the second caller left. He caught Father Jemitt eavesdropping and scolded him terribly. A few minutes later the other man left, slamming the door behind him."

Nancy frowned. "Poor Mr. Sidney! No wonder he said he'd had a tempestuous night."

"Did you know," Carol went on, "that there's some kind of family feud between Mr. Sidney's wife's family and his own relatives?"

"I suspected so," Nancy replied, but did not give any details. "Go on with your story, Carol."

"Father Jemitt was very angry at having been discovered. When he came downstairs he ordered me to bed. But I could hear poor Mr. Sidney pacing the floor, so finally I went up to see him.

"He said to me, 'Carol, will you call Mr. Drew? I want to make a new will.' He asked me to make the appointment secretly. I am—Oh, Nancy, I can't tell you."

"Never mind, then. You must do as you are requested," Nancy said. "But I wonder what Mr. and Mrs. Jemitt will think when they find out."

"Mother Jemitt left the house to walk to the bus right after you

came," Carol explained. "Father Jemitt gave me orders that he was not to be disturbed. He's working out in the garage, making some repairs on our car."

"When will Mrs. Jemitt be home?" Nancy asked.

"She is home!" said a harsh voice behind her.

They shrank back in alarm. To Carol's horror and Nancy's surprise, the innkeeper's wife had flung open the door of a nearby room. She held a hairbrush in her hand.

"Carol, you nasty little tattletale!" the woman shouted. "You had better be more sure of my whereabouts before you start blabbing family affairs to strangers!"

The angry woman thrust her scrawny neck out toward Carol and waved the brush menacingly.

"I heard every word you said, you impudent brat! And as for you, young lady," she said to Nancy, "the idea of your gossiping with this simple-minded girl is more than I'll take!"

Nancy leveled her calm blue eyes on the irate woman. For a moment Mrs. Jemitt faltered. Then, regaining her courage, the woman burst out again into a bitter tirade.

"For six years we've worked and slaved to make a home for Carol, and this is our reward!"

Carol cowered against Nancy, and her thin body quivered.

"If you act like a two-year-old you'll have to be treated like one," Mrs. Jemitt cried, hitting Carol on the shoulder with the back of the brush.

The girl gave a cry of pain as the brush descended again, this time on her knuckles. Nancy's face turned white with mingled disgust and anger.

"Stop!" she said, at the same time pulling Carol out of her foster mother's reach and jumping in front of the girl.

Mrs. Jemitt's eyes blazed. "Who are you to come interfering with a mother correcting a wayward child? The nerve of you! Why, you're only a youngster yourself!"

"You certainly are proving yourself unfit to take a mother's place," Nancy replied evenly.

Choking with rage, Mrs. Jemitt lashed out at Nancy, striking her on the arm with the brush. She raised her hand again to repeat the blow,

but Nancy deftly caught the woman's wrist and wrenched the hairbrush from her.

"I could have you arrested for that," she said.

"Who do you think you are?" sneered Mrs. Jemitt, but she made no attempt to take the brush, perhaps fearing that Nancy might use it!

"Who I am makes no difference, so far as your attacking me goes," Nancy replied.

"We'll see about that," the woman said. "This is my house and I can run it as I see fit, and that includes getting rid of intruders!"

Nancy answered without flinching, "This is not your house, and I am not an intruder!"

Mrs. Jemitt's jaw dropped. "Wh-what do you mean?" she stammered.

"This house belongs to Asa Sidney and I am here at his invitation."

"Who are you then, if you know everything?" the woman demanded.

"My name is Nancy Drew. Carson Drew is my father. Perhaps you've heard of him?"

"Carson Drew—the lawyer?" Mrs. Jemitt's arrogance suddenly vanished. "His name is in the papers all the time—and I've seen yours there, too. I didn't know who you were. I'm sorry I hit you. You won't tell your father, will you?" she begged. "I'll do anything to make amends."

"I'll make a bargain with you," Nancy said. "I won't tell my father if you'll promise not to harm Carol."

"I promise."

Nancy walked downstairs with the speechless Carol following. The young detective seated herself in the center of one of the empty dining rooms and motioned the other girl to take a chair.

Then, in a low voice, Nancy asked, "What is *really* troubling you?"

Carol began to speak, then closed her mouth. Nancy knew she would have to do some prodding.

"Are you suspicious, Carol, that the Jemitts are not completely honest?"

Carol gave a start. "Nancy, how did you guess?"

CHAPTER VI

An Important Errand

NANCY urged Carol to talk quickly before they might be interrupted.

The girl seemed hesitant to say more. “Oh, Nancy, I wish I were as smart as you. Everything seems so clear to you. To me it’s all a muddle.”

“Nonsense,” Nancy replied. “Just tell me whatever comes into your mind.”

“All right. But it’s difficult. Maybe I’d better talk about myself first. I’m an orphan—I guess you gathered that from what Mother Jemitt said. I know nothing about my parents. I was found in a church when I was two years old. The authorities couldn’t locate any of my family, so I was sent to an orphanage. I lived there until I was ten years old when the Jemitts took me.

“I’ve worked hard for them. Every day after school I would come home to find dishes and clothes piled up for me to wash. As soon as the law allowed me to leave school they made me stay home. Mr. Sidney urged them to let me go on, but they wouldn’t do it. I don’t think I owe the Jemitts anything. I’ve paid my way.

“Mr. Sidney was always nice to me, but after the Jemitts practically forced him to stay in the tower by telling him he wasn’t well and that he’d fall if he tried to come downstairs, they began to make me work harder and never let me go anywhere.”

“That’s a shame,” said Nancy. “Was it after Mr. Sidney stayed upstairs that you first suspected Mr. Jemitt of not being fair?”

“Yes.”

Carol, warmed by the new friendship, leaned toward Nancy, her eyes round with excitement. “I’m pretty sure that Father Jemitt is robbing Mr. Sidney. I’ve seen him sneaking around mysteriously and going to town with packages. After that he suddenly seems to have a lot of money, much more than this restaurant brings in. Of course I—”

“That’s very interesting,” Nancy said loudly. “Once we had some baby robins in a vine outside a bedroom window, too. Do you have

many wrens?"

Carol's mouth opened wide in astonishment.

"Good morning, miss!" said a man's voice.

Carol gulped. The voice was that of Frank Jemitt, and at once she understood why Nancy had suddenly interrupted her conversation with the strange remark about birds.

"Have you been served?" Jemitt asked, approaching the table. "Carol, get up and bring the young lady a glass of water!"

"Oh, please don't bother." Nancy smiled, restraining Carol. "I wasn't planning to eat lunch so early."

Jemitt pulled a chair from an adjoining table and prepared to join the conversation.

"You live hereabouts?" he asked Nancy.

"In River Heights," she answered. "I came back this morning with my father, whom Mr. Sidney wished to consult."

"Oh, are you Dr. Crosby's daughter?" Jemitt asked. "I knew he had a beautiful daughter, but I didn't dream—"

"I don't know Dr. Crosby," Nancy put in. "My father is Carson Drew."

Frank Jemitt's face turned a shade paler, and he swallowed heavily.

"Carson Drew—he's upstairs?" he asked.

"Yes, he's been there for over an hour now," Nancy replied coolly. "It must be an important consultation."

"I'm sure it can't be—I mean yes, it must be," Jemitt stammered, rising hurriedly. "Er—excuse me." The agitated man fled from the room.

Nancy watched his retreat with amusement. She wondered if he *was* a thief, and perhaps afraid Mr. Sidney had discovered that he was dishonest and was going to take action?

"I never saw Father Jemitt so upset," Carol commented. "He seems to be scared of your father."

"Which would confirm your suspicions and mine," Nancy remarked. "I think I'll keep an eye on Mr. Jemitt."

"Oh dear! I've talked too much." Carol sighed. "Maybe I'm all wrong."

At that moment Nancy heard her father's footsteps on the stairway.

She arose and hurried to the hall.

"Are you ready to go?" she asked.

"No," Mr. Drew replied. "Mr. Sidney's case is strange and complicated. After what I've heard, I shall not leave this house until the document is witnessed by someone competent to stand up under a grueling trial in court."

He went into the hall telephone booth and made a call. Nancy saw him frown, and in a minute came out, looking disappointed.

"The man I want to reach will be out for half an hour. I didn't want to give the message to anyone else. Nancy, I guess you'll have to help me. Speed is essential. Will you drive to the Smith's Ferry branch of the River Heights National Bank and ask for Mr. Hill—Raymond Hill? He's the executive vice president.

"Tell Mr. Hill I want him to come back here with you to witness an important document. I'm well acquainted with him, and I'm sure he will grant me this favor. Remember, the sooner you get back with him the better."

"I'll go at once," Nancy replied, excited by the new element of mystery.

She ran back to the table and told Carol that she had to go on an important errand for her father, but that she would return shortly.

As Nancy was talking, she saw the swinging door which led to the kitchen move slightly. Someone was listening.

"I think I'll go out this way, it's shorter," she said abruptly, skipping across to the kitchen door and suddenly pushing it ajar. As she had expected, the door did not open far, and there was a muttered exclamation from behind it.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! Did I hit somebody?" Nancy asked.

Mrs. Jemitt was revealed, looking rather dazed and rubbing her ear. "No, not much," she said sarcastically.

The woman wheeled about, darted through the kitchen, and vanished into the garden. Nancy was at her heels, but Mr. Drew called her back.

"You were a little too fast for me." He smiled. "I just wanted to tell you that Peter Boonton and Jacob Sidney, the two men you told me about, are coming here this morning. We want the will signed and witnessed before they arrive. That's the reason I'm asking for the greatest possible speed."

Nancy nodded and left the house. She saw Jemitt, who seemed to be having difficulty starting his automobile. His wife, her back to Nancy, was beside the car talking and gesticulating violently to him.

"She's probably telling him about my errand," Nancy thought, "so I must hurry. On the other hand, I may never have another opportunity to look at that buried box. I must find out if it belongs to Asa Sidney."

Out of sight of the Jemitts, she ran to the barn. It took only a moment to roll away the logs in the improvised woodpile and uncover what Jemitt had buried underneath.

"If it's what I think, I'm sure Dad would want me to take the chest to the bank," the young sleuth told herself.

The loose dirt was easy to brush aside, and anxiety gave Nancy added strength. She saw at a glance that the chest was indeed the one with the carved twisted candles, and marked Private *property of Asa Sidney.* She lifted it out.

Lugging the heavy ebony and brass chest, Nancy went around the far corner of the house and climbed into her car. She started the motor, locked the doors, and sped off.

The highway ahead was clear. Nancy glanced into her rear-vision mirror to see if anyone was on the road behind. What she had feared was true. Frank Jemitt's big car had lurched into the road and was roaring after her!

"Does he know where I'm going, and why?" she thought.

Jemitt's car, although left behind by Nancy's first burst of speed, began to crawl up.

"There's no doubt about it, he's after me," Nancy told herself. "Either he's going to prevent my bringing Mr. Hill, or force me to give up the stolen chest!"

CHAPTER VII

The Race

THE convertible sped along as fast as Nancy dared go. But Jemitt's more powerful car was slowly catching up. Would he force her off the road? A second glimpse in the rear-view mirror disclosed Carol's foster father crouched over the wheel of his car, his teeth clenched, his face red.

"If I can only reach the turn to Smith's Ferry," Nancy thought, "maybe I can outwit him."

Calculating her speed and the road with precision, she pretended to pass the intersecting highway. Then, with a quick twist of the wheel she shot into the fork. The low-slung convertible hugged the road and with squealing tires made the sharp curve safely.

Nancy slowed down a moment to glance behind her. A look of relief spread over her face.

Jemitt had fallen into the trap. Nancy's abrupt turn had caught him unawares, and he had shot ahead in the direction of River Heights. When he jammed on his brakes, the speeding car skidded off the road into a small ditch.

"Sorry, Mr. Jemitt." Nancy grinned.

In a short time she was driving up the main street of Smith's Ferry at a sedate pace. She found the bank without difficulty and parked, then picked up the chest and entered the building.

"I should like to speak with Mr. Hill—Mr. Raymond Hill," Nancy told the woman receptionist.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but if you'll tell him I'm here for Carson Drew on important business, I'm sure he'll see me," Nancy replied.

The woman smiled and went off. Presently she returned and ushered her into Mr. Hill's office. The pleasant bank officer was about Carson Drew's age.

"What can I do for your father, Nancy?" he asked. "Oh, don't be surprised that I know your name. I am no detective, but I've seen your

picture on your father's office desk, so I recognized you immediately."

Nancy smiled, then explained, "Dad would like you to witness an important document over which there may be some legal trouble. If it is convenient for you now, I'll drive you to where Dad is waiting. It's a matter in which minutes are precious, Mr. Hill."

"Then I'll come at once," the banker replied.

"But first," said Nancy, "I'd like to have this chest put in a safe place."

"I'll have it placed in the vault," Mr. Hill said, pressing a button to summon a clerk. "I'll give you a receipt."

A man in a uniform appeared in response to the summons. Mr. Hill gave him the box with instructions to place it in the bank's vault.

"You fill in this receipt," he told Nancy, handing her a form. She wrote a brief but accurate description of the chest, and Mr. Hill signed the paper.

"Now let's go," he said.

He accompanied Nancy to her car and she headed it toward the Sidney mansion. Mr. Hill leaned back in the seat without speaking, although his eyes traveled nervously from time to time to the speedometer.

"Look out!" he suddenly exclaimed.

They had just reached the intersecting highway when a car pulled across it. As Nancy deftly skirted the slow-moving and mud-splattered automobile she noted that the driver was Frank Jemitt.

"He must have damaged his car when he went into that ditch," she thought, pulling ahead.

A glance in the mirror showed Jemitt shaking both fists over his head at her retreating car. Nancy chuckled and briefly explained to Mr. Hill about the caretaker.

A few minutes later she turned into the driveway of The Sign of the Twisted Candles and swung to a stop at the porch steps.

"I'm not being kidnapped, am I?" Mr. Hill joked as he got out. "What is this place, and where is Mr. Drew?"

As if in answer to his question the lawyer stepped onto the porch and greeted the banker.

"You made excellent time," he said to Nancy. "I scarcely expected you to have reached Smith's Ferry yet. None of the interference we

have feared has made its appearance yet."

Mr. Hill followed the lawyer into the house. Nancy remained outside and sat down on the steps to mull over recent events. She speculated on what Jemitt would say to her when he arrived, and wished she knew what had made her father so concerned about Asa Sidney's affairs.

"I wonder if it affects Carol in any way," she pondered. "Wouldn't it be great if he left her some money in his will!"

The idea was driven from Nancy's mind by the approach of a car turning into the roadway of the inn.

"Here comes trouble," she said to herself.

For a moment Nancy thought it might be Jemitt's car, but it proved to be Jacob Sidney's sedan. Directly behind it was the car belonging to Peter Boonton.

Jacob Sidney jumped out and sprinted for the porch. Peter Boonton stepped down hurriedly and dashed after him.

Nancy had leaped to her feet and crossed the porch. Pretending to stumble, she now leaned against the front door for support. Boonton and his rival, panting heavily, drew up side by side in front of her.

"Stand aside and see that no one follows me!" Peter Boonton commanded.

"Nothing of the kind!" Jacob Sidney shouted. "I was here first. Listen, miss, I'm in a hurry to see Mr. Sidney on a confidential matter. Let me in!"

"He's busy just now," Nancy said. "He's in conference and doesn't wish to be disturbed. Won't you sit down?" She pointed toward the porch chairs.

"With whom is he conferring?" Boonton demanded.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that," Nancy replied. "Won't you two gentlemen have some tea?"

"Two gentlemen!" Jacob Sidney sneered. "I can account for only one here."

"Thank you for the compliment, Sidney," Boonton retorted. "I'm glad you admit you're no gentleman."

"Don't speak to me, you—you double-crosser!' Sidney fumed. "I'll have you understand that you and I are not on speaking terms!"

Boonton turned to Nancy. "Who are you?"

“Why, Mr. Boonton, we were introduced last night,” Nancy replied. “Bess and George were here with me, don’t you recall?”

“I remember you!” Sidney exclaimed. “You were in a car down where the tree fell. Say, what’s your business at this place?”

“See here, Sidney,” Boonton yelled, “you’re just trying to keep me from going upstairs! I can see through your tricks!”

“I’ll go up first because I’m his blood relative, and bear his name,” Sidney shouted.

He suddenly pushed Nancy aside and jerked open the door. With a strangled cry Boonton caught his rival by the coat and the two men leaped into the hallway together, Nancy at their heels.

A new obstacle confronted them, however, and Nancy felt like giving Carol Wipple three cheers. Across the bottom step of the stairs she had stretched a broom and a mop. Many of the treads were dripping soapy water, and halfway up knelt Carol, surrounded by three buckets of water.

“Hey! Let us up!” Boonton shouted.

Carol gave a start and upset one pail. The men leaped to one side just as a cascade of dirty water splashed down upon the spot where they had been standing.

“Oh, you scared me!” Carol cried, while Nancy suppressed a chuckle. “Wait, and I’ll mop the water so you can come up without slipping.”

While the two men fairly danced with impatience, Carol carried down one pail of water, then climbed the stairs again and carried another to the top. Then slowly she wiped away the excess water.

Her skirt was soaked and her hands red, but Carol seemed to be enjoying herself. She picked up the broom and mop, then the two men made a rush for the stairs.

They jammed together, clawing at each other for a moment. At last Boonton gained the advantage and darted upward, Sidney only a step behind.

“Carol, you were superb!” Nancy whispered, hugging the girl. “It gave Asa Sidney and Dad another precious five minutes.”

The young detective raced up the steps after the two men. She reached them just as they burst into the tower room.

CHAPTER VIII

Eavesdropper

"IN the name of the law I demand that you stop!" Peter Boonton shouted as he entered the tower room.

"Don't pay any attention to him!" Jacob Sidney answered coolly.

Nancy saw Asa Sidney in his favorite chair near the great twisted candle. Standing at a nearby table was Carson Drew, staring calmly over his shoulder at the intruders. Raymond Hill was seated at the table, a pen in his hand. Apparently he had just finished using it because he capped the pen and returned it to his pocket.

"What branch of the law do you represent?" Mr. Drew asked the newcomers, gathering up the papers.

Boonton stood stock-still, his mouth opening and closing. "I—I'm not an officer," he said finally. "But hasn't a relative any rights in a case like this?"

"A case like what?" Mr. Drew asked. "I've just finished drawing Mr. Asa Sidney's will, which Mr. Hill, here, has witnessed. Is there anything illegal about that?"

"I demand to see the document," Jacob Sidney announced, striding forward, "to be sure this is the document of a person who is mentally sound."

"I assure you it is," the lawyer said, somewhat annoyed.

Jacob spoke up. "We don't want any ideas put into this old man's head."

The remark angered Nancy. Her father's code of justice was rigid and unyielding. Her blue eyes flashing, she said, "Mr. Sidney, I think you owe my father an apology and Mr. Asa Sidney too!"

Jacob Sidney gave an ingratiating smile. "Little spitfire, eh? Who are you, anyhow? Everybody seems to be running this show except those who should be."

Angry, Asa Sidney arose and faced his relatives. "Why is it," he said, "that you have left me alone for over two years, and have suddenly become concerned about my mental condition and my affairs? Is it

because you suspect that I won't last long and you want my money? I assure you I am just as able to take care of my own business today as I was two years ago."

"I don't doubt it, Uncle Asa," Jacob Sidney said in mollifying tones. "I just want to warn you against putting too much confidence in strangers."

"And not only strangers, but scheming relatives," Peter Boonton interjected. "You must know that *I* have your best interests at heart, Uncle Asa."

"Just the same," said the old man, "a stranger may prove to be a great friend." He clapped Nancy on the shoulder, finally letting his arm rest there affectionately.

He turned to his nephews. "When I need your advice I'll send for you," he said testily.

"I was only trying to help," Jacob muttered.

"Do you really wish to be of service to me?" Asa asked, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Yes, indeed," Jacob replied, eager to ingratiate himself with the old man.

"Let me do it," Peter offered, thrusting himself forward.

"Well, you may both do it," Asa said, stroking his long beard.

"What shall we do?" chorused the nephews.

"Get out!" Asa thundered in a tone that surprised everyone. "Get out of here and stay out until I ask you to come back! You've sickened me, both of you. You think I have money and you're fluttering around me like a pair of vultures waiting for me to die! Go!"

His nephews paled at their schemes being ex posed like this before the lawyer, the banker and, most of all, before a young girl. Nancy felt Asa's hand tremble as it rested on her shoulder. He swayed as he clung for a moment to her arm to steady himself.

His nephews backed toward the door. Nancy feared that another outburst from old Asa would seriously sap his feeble strength, so she slipped toward the door to speed the men's departure.

"Please be calm and reasonable," Peter Boonton said in a low, soothing tone. "I was impetuous, and I beg you to bear me no ill will, Uncle."

Asa wearily signaled to Nancy to open the door. She grasped the

knob and swung the door inward.

"Oh!" she exclaimed.

Frank Jemitt was crouched just outside!

"I—I dropped something. I—I—I—" he stammered. The innkeeper stared at Nancy and the others in dismay.

"I—I dropped something," he repeated. "It was when I was cleaning this morning."

"You were eavesdropping," Boonton said, advancing toward the man.

"Never!" Jemitt wailed. "I wouldn't do such a thing!"

He teetered for a moment on the top step, then with a yell of fright toppled over and rolled headlong down the stairs. He picked himself up on the landing.

"Are—are you hurt?" Nancy gasped.

"I'll sue you, Boonton, for causing me to lose my balance!" Jemitt shouted, rubbing his head and one shin. "I might have broken my neck!"

"Frank," Asa called, "when you get all the way down, open the front door for these two gentlemen."

All but Peter and Jacob smiled. The two men silently descended the stairway.

As they vanished, Asa Sidney sighed deeply. "I hope they never return."

"I'll tell you a secret about your family," said Nancy. "They're not all like your nephews. The two girls who were here with me to celebrate your birthday are Bess Marvin and George Fayne."

"Well, well," Asa Sidney said, a smile coming over his face, "I'm glad to hear there are a few charming people in my family tree."

Mr. Hill said he must return to the bank. He shook hands with Asa Sidney, then spoke to Nancy's father.

"I didn't know that acting as witness to the signing of a will could become such an interesting adventure.... And, Carson, I'll certainly remember all you told me at our little conference. Is there anything further?"

"No, I'm sure you understand the general situation as well as I do," Mr. Drew replied. "Shall Nancy drive you back to the bank?"

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Mr. Hill said. “I’ll phone my chauffeur who is no doubt waiting there for me, and have him come here. It must be very close to 1 nchtime.”

“I don’t have to consult my watch to agree with you.” Mr. Drew smiled. “How about you, Nancy?”

“I could eat—indeed I could! But I can wait, too.”

“Good! I want to question Jemitt,” her father said. “Well, then, good-by for the present, Raymond.”

As he left the tower, and Mr. Drew paused in the doorway for another word with old Mr. Sidney, soft footfalls were heard on the stairs. Carol appeared, carrying a loaded tray.

“I—I made some sandwiches,” she said shyly. “And a pitcher of cocoa.”

“Wonderful! Wonderful!” the lawyer exclaimed. “And you must eat with us, Carol. I should like to become better acquainted with you.”

“Carol is a very good girl, my only comfort and helper,” Asa Sidney said. “My dear child, sit here beside me. You look very tired.”

“I’m not tired, really,” the young waitress replied stoutly, putting the tray on the table and lifting the cloth that covered it. “Now, please help yourselves. I can’t stay, because some people have arrived and I must serve them.”

She hurried off and the others began to eat. When they finished, Nancy said, “Did Mr. Hill tell you men about the chest I put in the bank vault?”

“No,” they answered.

“Mr. Sidney,” Nancy went on, “did you ask Mr. Jemitt to bury your chest that used to be under that table?” She pointed.

The old man looked at the spot in amazement. “Why, no, of course not. What do you know about it?”

Nancy told her story and added, “I hope I did the right thing. Anyway, here is the receipt.” She took it from her handbag and handed it to Mr. Sidney.

“You certainly used your head,” the old man told her. “Thanks.” Then he chuckled. “Outwitting Jemitt, who’s three times your age, is an accomplishment. You’re proud of her, aren’t you, Mr. Drew?”

The lawyer looked grave. “This is a very serious matter, Nancy. I’m relieved that everything turned out all right, but I think we should ask

Jemitt for an explanation of his action."

He went downstairs and a few minutes later returned with the manager of The Twisted Candles. Frank Jemitt was told about the chest.

A look of fright came over his face for the fraction of a second, then he said smoothly, "Sure I took the chest. Mr. Sidney slept later than usual and I was afraid those conniving relatives of his would come up here and steal it. I assume the contents are valuable?"

Asa Sidney did not reply. He seemed to be lost in thought.

Nancy and her father exchanged glances. They doubted Jemitt's story but had to admit his motive might have been an honest one.

"All right, Frank," Asa Sidney said finally, "I accept your explanation, but don't take anything more out of this house."

The innkeeper bowed and without a word hurried off.

Asa Sidney said to the Drews, "There are valuable papers and some silver pieces in the chest." Nancy had speculated correctly. After a pause he added, "I realize I am at a great disadvantage being up here alone. Perhaps I depend too much on Carol to keep me informed on the management downstairs."

Nancy thought, "And Carol's too considerate to upset him by telling about the way she's treated and the run-down condition of the inn."

A faraway look came into the old man's eyes. "It is my turn to reveal a secret. My memory isn't what it used to be. My dear wife and I had camouflaged cupboards built in this house and hid many things of hers and mine in them, but I've forgotten where they are. She took hers away. Let's hope the rest haven't been found and stolen. I hereby appoint you, Nancy, and Carol—and your friends Bess and George—to do some searching. But one word of caution. It must be done without the knowledge of the Jemitts."

"Oh, I'd love that!" Nancy exclaimed. "Okay, Dad?" Her father nodded approval and she grinned happily. "But I'll have to eat an awful lot of meals here and call on you very often to make my sleuthing look natural."

"Remember," the old man warned, "secrecy! Secrecy!"

CHAPTER IX

Doubtful Friendship

MR. DREW said he would meet Nancy downstairs —he wanted to speak to Frank Jemitt before leaving. His daughter lingered to ask Asa Sidney a few questions.

"Please tell me which bedroom you and your wife used to occupy."

"The master bedroom at the east end of the hall overlooking the driveway."

"Do the Jemitts use it now?" Nancy queried.

"No, they've taken one at the west end. Carol's is opposite theirs. Mine and two others used to be given to travelers, but no guests have been here for a couple of years. Emma said the place was making enough money without it."

Nancy made no comment. Instead she asked, "Would there be any special way to identify the hiding places of the articles?"

"Oh yes. By the design of a twisted candle. It is also on boxes and chests."

"That will make it easy," Nancy said.

With a sudden feeling of affection and pity for the old man, she kissed him and said good-by, promising to start her search the next day.

At the front porch Nancy came upon another dramatic scene and stepped back a couple of feet into the hall so as not to intrude. Her father was talking to Frank Jemitt, whose back was against an open window in the dining room.

"What was your income from the pastureland last year?" Mr. Drew was saying.

"Only about two hundred dollars."

"Did you give Mr. Sidney an accounting of it?"

"I spent the money fixing up the place."

"In general repairs to the building, or in the restaurant equipment?"

Mr. Drew asked.

"I—I forget," Jemitt said, wiping his brow. "General repairs, of course. Sure, that's right."

"The house hasn't been painted," Mr. Drew commented. "The grounds are in bad shape. What improvements did you make?"

"Say, I'm not on the witness stand!" Jemitt snarled. "I'm not going to answer questions you got no business asking. If you think there's anything crooked going on, maybe you're right. Keep an eye on those two guys who were here this morning."

Nancy had stood so quietly that she had not been noticed by Mrs. Jemitt, who had sneaked in from the kitchen. The woman cautiously took up a position at the window near her husband.

As Mr. Drew paced up and down the porch, Mrs. Jemitt, using the drapery for concealment, whispered something to Mr. Jemitt. He slyly pulled a long envelope from beneath his jacket and held it behind him. His wife's hand reached out and took it.

"Yes, Mr. Drew," Jemitt went on, "and what's more I think each one of those fellows suspects the other of sneaking things out of this house."

Nancy stepped softly from the hall and walked up behind Mrs. Jemitt, who smiled as she glanced at the letter, then turned noiselessly away. On her face was a look of secret triumph, but the expression was quickly wiped away as Nancy confronted her.

"What do you want?" the woman snapped.

"Nothing at all," Nancy said with an innocent air. "I was just looking for an envelope—Oh, you've found it, haven't you?"

"Not at all," Mrs. Jemitt replied, concealing the envelope beneath her apron. "This is for me and it just came in the morning mail."

"Perhaps you made a mistake?" Nancy remarked. "May I look at the address?"

"You may not," Mrs. Jemitt retorted. "I guess a body has a right to some privacy in her own house, even if it is open to the public."

She brushed past Nancy, only to meet Mr. Drew. Attracted by the sharp voices, he had entered the room to investigate.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"No trouble at all, thank you," Mrs. Jemitt said. "Just a little misunderstanding."

Nancy spoke up. “I happened to see Mr. Jemitt pass an envelope through the window to his wife, and thought it might—er—be for Mr. Sidney.”

Her announcement took Mrs. Jemitt completely by surprise. In her agitation she dropped the envelope, and Nancy swiftly scooped it up.

“There is a misunderstanding,” she said. “This letter is for Mr. Sidney.”

“I was just going to take it up to the old gentleman,” the woman said.

“Then I apologize for detaining you.” Nancy smiled. “I see it’s from the Midwestern Mining Company.”

Without another word Mrs. Jemitt took it and hurried upstairs. Nancy, with a wink at her father, followed to be sure it was delivered.

When she came down, Mr. Drew said, “My business here is finished. Let’s go!”

As they walked to the car, he continued, “You’ve just given me some very valuable information, Nancy. Among Mr. Sidney’s assets are shares of stock in the mining company. The old man thought they were worthless because he had received no dividends in several years.

“I promised to investigate,” the lawyer said, “because I have some of that stock myself and it pays well. I’m sure that envelope contained a dividend check because I’ve just received one.”

“Then you suspect the Jemitts of taking Mr. Sidney’s dividend checks and forging the endorsements on them?” Nancy asked as they rode along.

“I’m afraid so,” Mr. Drew replied. “It will take time to prove it, though.”

“While you’re doing that,” said Nancy, “I’ll start my search in the house for cupboards marked with the sign of a twisted candle,” She slid into the driver’s seat.

Mr. Drew got out of the car at his office. Nancy, excited by the prospect of going back to the Sidney mansion with Bess and George, went directly to the Marvin home. To her dismay, she saw Peter Boonton’s car at the curb.

“Oh dear! I don’t want to meet him,” she thought. “Maybe I’d better drive over to the Faynes’ and see if George is there.”

As she sat debating, Nancy suddenly saw George look out a window directly at her. To Nancy’s surprise George did not wave; just stared,

then moved out of sight.

"How strange!" Nancy thought. "Something seems to be on George's mind. I'm sure she saw me."

Nancy decided to try seeing the girls, anyway, and tell them of Asa Sidney's request. She walked to the door.

Bess answered the bell. "Hello, Nancy," she said, stepping outside and closing the door behind her. "Great-Uncle Peter's inside. I hear you were at The Sign of the Twisted Candles again today."

Nancy nodded. "That's what I want to talk to you about, Bess. Call George, will you? I have some exciting things to tell you, and we must go out there tomorrow."

"Oh, I don't think I care to come," Bess replied. "And I'm sure George wouldn't be interested, either."

Nancy flushed with disappointment and embarrassment at Bess's cool retort.

"I—I'm sorry," she said with a lump in her throat. "Dad has been retained as Mr. Sidney's lawyer, and I've been given a job too. Some problems have come up. We'd have fun tackling them together."

"Oh, so your father is really taking sides in the case, is he?" Bess asked frigidly. "I'm sorry, Nancy, but I must go back inside."

Stung by the snub, Nancy ran to her car and drove away, tears brimming in her eyes. What sinister influence in the bitter Boonton-Sidney feud had brought Bess and George to a point of breaking off a lovely friendship?

Nancy drove on and on, lost in thought. Suddenly she realized that the road she had subconsciously chosen led to the Sidney mansion.

"Maybe fate is steering me back there," the young sleuth told herself.

When she arrived at the turn and walked in, no one was around. The Jemitts' car was gone. When Carol did not come out to greet Nancy, apprehension seized her. Had something happened?

She shook off the feeling and ascended the stairs. After all, she had a right to be here—this was a public restaurant. At the top of the stairway she met Carol.

"Nancy!" the girl cried. "Oh, I'm so glad you came back. I have something marvelous to tell you. Right after you left I heard Mr. Sidney's bell ring and rushed up there. He said he'd asked you, Bess, George, and me to do some searching, but that you wouldn't be back

until tomorrow, so he wanted me to start. The Jemitts have gone to town.

"Mr. Sidney remembered a false drawer in the bottom of a bureau in the empty master bedroom and had me look there. What do you think I found?"

"Clothes?"

"No."

"Jewelry?"

"You're getting warm. Nancy, it was a diamond bracelet!"

CHAPTER X

A Shocking Summons

"A diamond bracelet!" Nancy gasped. "What did you do with it, Carol?"

"I gave it to Mr. Sidney." She chuckled. "He hid the bracelet under the seat of his chair. Oh, Nancy, it was beautiful lying there in its velvet box."

"What did he say?" Nancy asked.

Carol laughed softly. He said, 'Keep going and bring everything to me before those vultures get my fortune!' Nancy, nobody's in the house. Let's search right now."

Nancy did not need to be urged. First they scoured the master bedroom where the bracelet had been cached. Neither the walls, floor, nor closet yielded any clue to where there might be a camouflaged safe or other kind of hiding place. Next the bed, wardrobe, and other pieces of furniture were searched. They revealed nothing.

"Let's try another room," Carol urged.

Nancy glanced at her watch. "It's four o'clock. By any chance did Mrs. Jemitt ask you to prepare food for dinner—like putting a roast in the oven?"

Carol clapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh my goodness! I was supposed to put a leg of lamb in the stove."

Nancy chuckled. "Then you'd better go do it quickly. If Mrs. Jemitt returns and finds you haven't done it—"

Carol fairly flew from the room and down the stairs. Nancy continued the search alone. She walked into what had been the adjoining dressing room. As she gazed around, her eyes were attracted to an ornate wooden panel directly above the mirror of a walnut dressing table. At first glance one might mistake the small square as part of the furniture below it.

At once Nancy noted two unusual features about the panel, which she suspected might be a door: it had no visible way to open it and a series of connecting loops was carved on its face. On a hunch Nancy

bent over so she could view the pattern sideways.

"I'm right!" she thought. "It is a twisted candle! Something must be hidden behind there. But how do I open that door?"

Nancy gazed at it for fully a minute. Then she concluded that if a particular spot on the door were pushed, it might release a hidden lock.

Not wishing to be disturbed and fearful the Jemitts might rush in, Nancy went into the bedroom and turned the key in the door to the hall. Then she hastened back and pulled the dressing table aside.

"Oh, I hope I can get this open!"

Nancy was breathing excitedly now. Inch by inch she pressed a thumb over the entire surface. Nothing happened.

"It's tricky," she thought.

Next Nancy tried both thumbs, experimenting with various combinations. Still nothing happened.

"I'm sure I'm not wrong," she murmured. Suddenly she smiled. "The candle, of course. That's the clue!"

This time she ran a finger over the whole design and finally felt a slight protrusion on one of the swirls. She pushed it hard and the panel with the carved candle dropped into her hand. At the rear of the opening was a latch. Quickly she lifted it and a door swung open.

To her surprise a music box inside began to play. Now she could see that it was a highly ornate —and, she guessed, priceless old piece. Dainty dancing figures moved around the top. Nancy was about to lift the music box from its hiding place when there was a knock on the door. Instantly she replaced everything and hurried to open it.

Carol stood there. She whispered, "They're home! You'd better scoot!"

"You're right. Listen, Carol. Tell Mr. Sidney I found a gorgeous music box but didn't have time to take it to him."

"How marvelous! It'll make him very happy."

The two girls rushed down the stairs. Carol ran to the kitchen, while Nancy dashed out the front door. No one was in sight and she drove off quickly.

It was not until she reached home that Nancy recalled Bess's rebuff. Despite the exciting story she had to tell at dinner about her afternoon's search, the diamond bracelet, and the music box, the

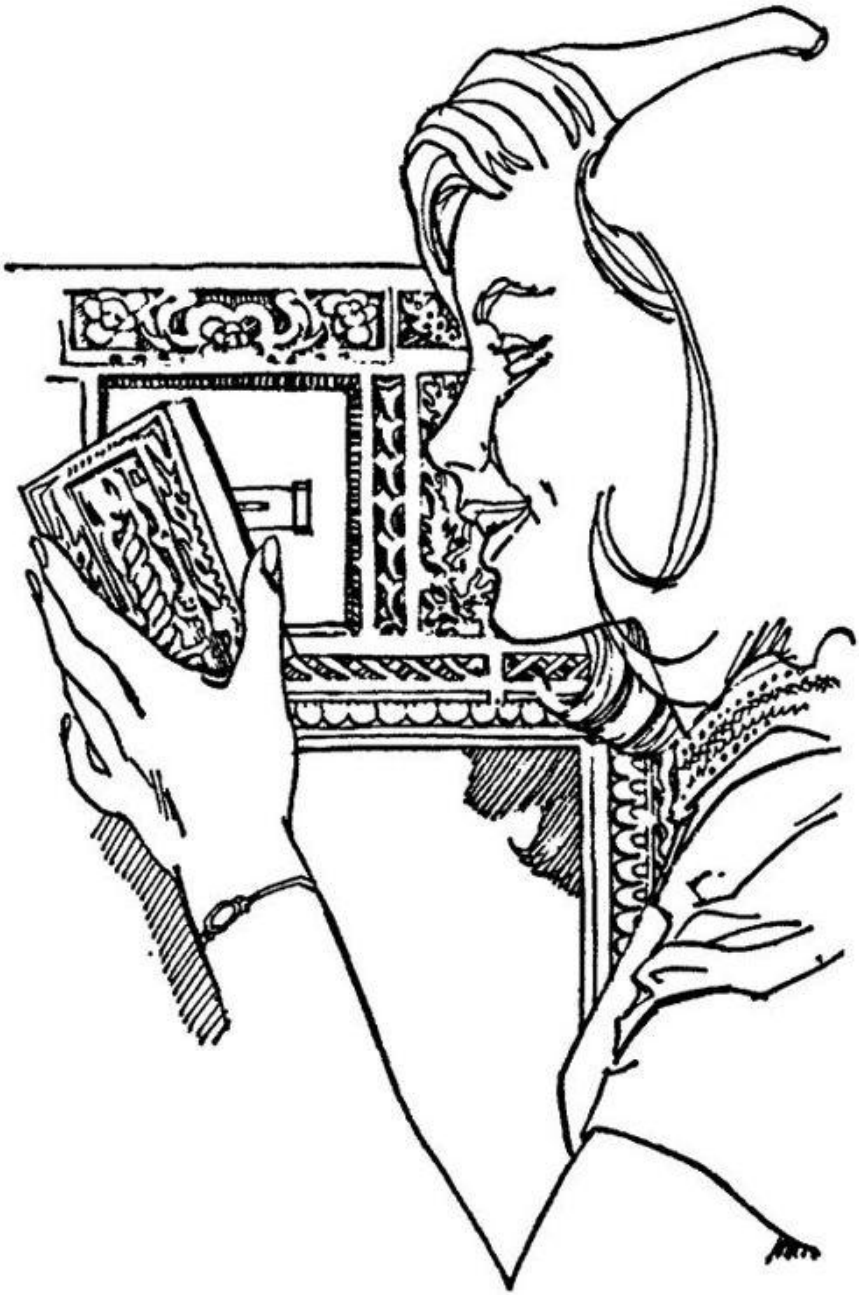
young sleuth became glum and did not eat much.

"What's happened to your appetite?" Hannah Gruen asked her.

"Nothing."

Mr. Drew regarded her thoughtfully. "Now then, partner!" he said, rising from the table and putting an arm about his daughter's shoulders. "Out with it! Something's bothering you."

"Oh dear! You always know, don't you?" Nancy said with a pensive smile. "Dad, for some reason connected with Asa Sidney's case, George and Bess are angry with me. George won't speak to me at all, and Bess snubbed me this afternoon."



The panel with the curved candle dropped into her hand!

Nancy's lip quivered at the memory.

"Hm!" the lawyer said. "That's too bad." He frowned. "Some people

are hard to understand. Why should the Marvins and Faynes poison the minds of their daughters with a family feud so old it concerns none of them? It's pitiful. I don't know how to help you, Nancy. You'll have to accept the situation, I'm afraid, and trust that time will set matters straight."

"I suppose," said Nancy, "that both sides are suspicious of you for being Asa Sidney's counsel, and for that reason George and Bess are forbidden to be friends with me."

Mr. Drew nodded. "You'll have to let events prove that neither you nor I have meddled in the affairs of the family."

"I'm disappointed in George and Bess just the same." Nancy sighed again.

The lawyer looked at his daughter sympathetically and decided that the best way to mend Nancy's hurt feelings was to lead the discussion into other channels.

"I'm afraid Mr. Sidney's case is more complicated than we realize," he remarked. "It's a big puzzle."

Nancy instantly became alert. "What's the trouble?"

"I have a strong hunch there's systematic pilfering that's draining the old man's fortune," her father said.

Nancy asked, "Do you suspect anyone besides the Jemitts? Surely Peter Boonton and Jacob Sidney are not dishonest, no matter how badly they act."

"We can safely rule out Boonton and Sidney," Mr. Drew said.

"Let's call on Asa Sidney tomorrow morning and see what we can find out," Nancy suggested.

That night she slept uneasily. She kept thinking of the big sleuthing job ahead of her and of the problem with Bess and George. At breakfast she ate little. Her father sat lost in thought, with Hannah Gruen hovering over them, coaxing them to try her waffles.

The telephone rang and she went to answer it. Nancy heard Hannah say, "I can't hear you at all! Who is this?"

"I'll take it, Hannah," Nancy said quietly as she hurried into the hall.

"Nancy Drew speaking. Who is this?"

"Oh, Nancy!"

The exclamation came faintly over the wire, ending in a deep,

shuddering sigh.

"Hello? Who is this? VVho's speaking? What's the matter?"

"Nancy—something—something—"

"Is this Bess? Or George?" Nancy demanded.

"Nancy, this is Carol. Oh, please come at once! Something awful has happened. O-oh!"

There was a sharp click, then silence. Carol had hung up, leaving Nancy in a state of mingled surprise and alarm. She ran to her father at once, and in a few words repeated what she had heard.

Mr. Drew's face became grave. "We must go there immediately," he said. "I will be ready as soon as you bring your car around in front."

A few minutes later Nancy and her father were on the now-familiar road to The Sign of the Twisted Candles. Few words were exchanged between them, for their minds were intent on the mysterious and urgent summons from Carol.

What could have happened? Nancy thought of a dozen answers. Perhaps Mrs. Jemitt had not kept her promise and had done something cruel to Carol. Perhaps Peter and Jacob had met again, and had joined in a pitched battle.

At last the tower of the old mansion could be seen above the trees, and a minute later Nancy steered into the sweeping driveway.

"Oh!" she gasped, applying the brakes.

An undertaker's long black car was just driving away. Someone was —dead!

Nancy did not wait for her father but ran into the house. She halted at the sight of Carol's huddled form on the bottom step of the big staircase, her head on her knees, her thin shoulders shaking with sobs.

"Carol!" Nancy cried, sitting down beside the girl and clasping her hands. "Tell me what happened."

"Mis-Mister Si-Si-Sidney," Carol said. "He died during the night. I found him—I thought he was asleep—when I brought up his breakfast this morning."

As Mr. Drew walked into the hall, Nancy stated soberly, "Mr. Sidney is dead."

"Too bad," he said with a shake of his head. "I'm sorry. It's true that he lived far, far longer than most persons do, and his life was not a happy one. If only he had lasted a little longer until certain matters

could be straightened out, what trouble could have been averted!"

"Why, Dad, what do you mean?" Nancy asked.

"I mean that the bickering relatives will now gather and begin to fight over the estate. Then there are other people who probably have already removed some of his property, reducing the value of the estate."

At this juncture, Frank Jemitt appeared with a long face. "Mr. Sidney has gone to his just reward," the innkeeper intoned.

"I shall stay here as his executor and take charge," Mr. Drew replied simply.

"Who asked you to butt in?" Jemitt snapped, dropping his pretense of sorrow. "There's nothing to be done. Emma and I have made arrangements for the funeral, and we'll even pay for it out of our own pockets!"

"That won't be necessary," the lawyer told him.

Nancy noted that Asa Sidney's death seemed to have added to Jemitt's courage—and offensive-ness.

Mr. Drew regarded the man keenly. Determined to assume charge of the late Asa Sidney's personal effects, he said evenly:

"Your services will not be needed here much longer, Mr. Jemitt. You are free to make other plans and leave any time after the funeral."

"Is that so? Well, we'll see about that!" Jemitt snapped.

CHAPTER XI

Surprise Inheritance

SHOCKED by Jemitt's complete lack of mourning for a man who had been so kind to him, Nancy, her father, and Carol looked at the innkeeper in disgust.

"I think," said Mr. Drew, "that you had better keep such thoughts to yourself until after Mr. Sidney's will is read. Until then, there is work for you to do. First of all, prepare a sign to put over the one at the entrance. Mark it 'Closed.' Then make a complete list of all the food on hand."

Jemitt answered defiantly, "Why do you think you can give me orders?"

"Because as Mr. Sidney's attorney I am in charge here. I'll need a duplicate set of keys."

The manager stepped back in surprise. "Okay, I'll do what you say. But first my wife and I will clean up the tower room."

At that announcement Nancy squeezed her father's hand as a signal not to leave the couple alone on the third floor. He understood her message.

"Mr. Jemitt, my daughter, and Carol—if she feels able—will accompany you. Do not touch anything but the bedding and towels. I'll join you after I make a few phone calls."

The caretaker's eyelids narrowed to a look of hatred but he kept silent.

"I—I'll be all right," Carol said, rising.

Nancy put an arm about her and they went upstairs together. A quiver ran through the younger girl's body as they entered the tower, but this lasted only a moment. The Jemitts arrived almost immediately. Instead of confining their work to the bed and bathroom, they began mop-ping and dusting. It was soon evident that they were doing more snooping than cleaning.

Fearful that the Jemitts would find the hidden bracelet, Nancy finally spoke up. "My father did not ask you to do this," she said.

"Humph!" the woman exclaimed. "And what does he know about cleaning?" She went on with her work.

"Stop!" Nancy ordered. "Carol, run down and tell my father to come right up here."

As Carol started from the room, Jemitt said, "Oh, all right. Emma, take the linen and blanket off the bed." As she did, Nancy saw him lift a corner of the mattress and peer underneath.

Realizing his action had been detected, Jemitt quickly straightened up and went to get the towels from an adjacent bathroom. By this time Mr. Drew had arrived and instantly Jemitt and his wife vanished down the stairway.

But the Drews heard Jemitt shout back, "Carol, don't you dare take any more orders from Nancy Drew or her father! We're your foster parents and you'll do as we say! Right now get to work on our bedrooms."

Nancy sighed. "Dad, isn't it frightful?"

He nodded. "I see more trouble ahead, but two things we must do: protect Carol and take care of this old mansion. Nancy, do you think Hannah would be willing to come here and stay with you?"

"Oh, Dad, I'm sure she would, and I'm glad that you want me to stay."

The lawyer smiled. "I think Carol needs you." A few minutes later several relatives arrived, saying Jemitt had phoned them. Nancy was glad Bess and George were not among them, because she did not feel equal to coping with that unhappy situation at this time. Mrs. Fayne and Mrs. Marvin came with Peter Boonton. They spoke coolly to Nancy. Jacob Sidney was accompanied by a man he introduced as his legal adviser. All of them went to the third floor.

Interest centered upon Mr. Drew. He had taken his stand like a sentry at the door to the tower room and allowed no one to enter.

The two nephews pleaded for a chance to go into Asa Sidney's room "just to pick up a small keepsake," but were denied. When an opportunity came to speak to the lawyer privately, Jacob Sidney tried to learn what was in his great-uncle's will.

"I am not free to say at this time," Mr. Drew answered.

Midmorning a deputy from the sheriff's office arrived in response to the attorney's summons. He affixed a seal to the door of the tower room, where Asa Sidney had told Mr. Drew he kept valuable papers.

Mr. Drew's only response to all questions was, "I must comply with the law and the ethics of my profession."

He did, however, have a longer conversation with the Jemitts. "You are responsible for that room," he told them. "If the seal is broken you will be arrested. The windows are also locked and sealed so there is an additional responsibility to see that no one climbs in through them." Awe-struck, the caretaker and his wife agreed to follow his orders.

At last Mr. Drew called the relatives together in the living room and told them of the funeral plans. "We'll meet here in two days to read the will," he added. "At two in the afternoon."

"If that's the earliest, all right," Peter Boonton assented with a grumble and the relatives left.

A little while later Mr. Drew took his daughter's car and drove off. Nancy went to talk to Carol, who was in her room. The girl was heart-broken.

"I feel so lonely," she confessed. "I hope Mr. Sidney left this house to the Jemitts. It's the only home I know, and it's full of memories of his kindness to me. I'd like to remain here—where I can see you often, Nancy."

"Don't worry, Carol. And for the next few days I'm going to stay with you all the time. Our darling housekeeper, Hannah Gruen, is coming out to be with us."

"Oh, thank you," Carol said. "That makes me feel so much better."

Mrs. Gruen arrived by taxi at lunchtime and the girls went down to meet her. She carried two suitcases, one of them Nancy's.

After expressing her sympathy to Carol, she asked, "What was being sent from this mansion in a truck?"

When Nancy and Carol said that they didn't know, Hannah went on, "There were several cartons. Here comes the man now who helped load them." Jemitt was striding toward the group from the kitchen.

"Hannah, this is Mr. Jemitt," Nancy introduced him. "I'd like—"

"This place is closed," he said abruptly. "Didn't you see the sign? No meals, no rooms."

Mrs. Gruen said with dignity, "I have been invited to stay here."

"By whom?" When Jemitt was told, he sneered, "Well, don't expect my wife and me to wait on you."

As he started to leave, Nancy said, "What were you sending from

here in cartons?"

"What do you mean?"

Nancy explained and Jemitt answered, "Just some personal things. Your father told me and my wife to get out of here, so I've started packing." He hurried off.

"Hm!" said Mrs. Gruen. "I guess I've moved into a hornet's nest."

Nancy nodded in agreement, then whispered, "I wish I had my car here. I'd follow that truck."

"You can do it, anyway," Hannah Gruen told her. "Mose Blaine drove me here in his taxi. I had him wait in case you wanted to pick up your car. It's at your father's office."

"Oh you dear!" Nancy cried. She grabbed her purse, rushed from the inn, and jumped into the taxi. "Did you notice which direction that truck took?" she asked the driver.

"Yes. It went east."

"Please follow it," Nancy directed.

Mose Blaine looked surprised but did as she requested. Nancy said, "Don't break the law, but go as fast as you can."

The man grinned. "This buggy's kind o' old, Miss Drew, and it's got rattles and creaks. I always say it groans with machinery rheumatiz pains."

Nancy smiled as she bounced and swayed on the rear seat. The taxi did not catch up to the truck until it pulled into the yard of a storage warehouse. Nancy asked Mose to wait for her at the curb. She waited until the driver of the truck went into the warehouse, then stepped out and walked into the yard. Pretending to give the cartons a casual glance, she looked for markings. One box lay on its side. Bold crayoned words read:

FRANK JEMITT
VALUABLE
SPECIAL STORAGE

Were the contents of the cartons the property of Asa Sidney? Nancy wondered as she hurried back to the taxi. She directed Mose to Mr. Drew's office. When she reached it, Nancy paid the amount on the meter, gave the driver a generous tip, and stepped out.

He thanked her, then said, "Ain't you goin' to tell me what the mystery is?"

Nancy chuckled. “Someday, maybe.” She headed for the office building.

Mr. Drew was amazed at her story and remarked, “You’re on the job all right. When you arrive back at the inn with your own car, I doubt that Jemitt will suspect you followed the truck—and that’s just as well.”

As soon as Nancy returned to the Sidney mansion, she had lunch, then arranged with Mrs. Gruen and Carol to work subtly on one of two aspects of the case: they were to watch every movement of the Jemitts. She herself would continue to look for hidden articles.

The afternoon and evening wore on with no unusual happenings and no luck in her search. Hannah Gruen helped with the preparation of meals and tidied the house. In this way she was able to keep track of Mrs. Jemitt, while her husband’s comings and goings were watched by Carol.

Nancy had found no more signs of a twisted candle, indicating hidden treasure. In her bedroom she made a discovery. Under the large rug a section of flooring was removable and Nancy pulled it up. To her disappointment, the space below was empty. Had the Jemitts removed something from the hiding place? she wondered.

Several times that day and the next Nancy found Carol alone, weeping. “I feel so terrible,” she finally said. “My dear, true friend Mr. Sidney is gone. Now I’ll have to leave this place with the Jemitts. Nancy, I just dread it.”

Nancy comforted the girl the best she could, but had to admit that the outlook was bleak.

At last the funeral was over and the relatives gathered at The Sign of the Twisted Candles for the reading of the will. They assembled in the living room. George and Bess were there. The cousins nodded a solemn greeting to Nancy but stayed close to their parents.

Mr. Drew directed the Jemitts, Carol, and Nancy to be present. Nancy stood behind Carol, who had taken a seat at the edge of the circle of whispering relatives, her eyes downcast in shyness.

“We have met,” Mr. Drew began, “to read the last will and testament of Mr. Asa Sidney. The document was written only a few days ago, in his own hand and in duplicate. The original is already filed in the courthouse. I hold the copy here. The two have been carefully compared and found to be exact duplicates.

“The will was witnessed by Mr. Raymond Hill, executive vice president of the Smith’s Ferry branch of the River Heights National

Bank. I preface the reading of these papers with these remarks because some of its provisions may surprise you. I may add that—although I am named sole executor of the estate—I had never met Mr. Sidney until I was summoned by him to help draw up this document."

Mr. Drew opened a bulky envelope, and unfolded some crisp sheets of paper.

"Mr. Hill, will you identify this testament?"

The banker, who had been seated unnoticed in one corner, arose, examined the papers, and nodded.

"That is my signature," he said. "And those are my initials on each sheet. This is the document which Mr. Sidney prepared, and which I witnessed." He sat down.

"Hurry up with the reading and cut out the fancy business!" Jacob Sidney called out.

Mr. Drew shot him a disapproving look. Then he began to read, while everyone except Carol leaned forward tensely.

" 'I, Asa Sidney, being of sound mind, although in the hundred and first year of my life, do hereby declare this to be my last will and testament, prepared by my own hand, legally witnessed, and replaces all previous wills made by me.

" 'First, all my just debts are to be paid. Following that, all my property, real and personal, is to be disposed of after my death, as follows:

" 'These relatives of myself and my wife, namely Jacob Sidney, Peter Boonton, Anna Boonton Marvin and her daughter Bess Marvin, Louise Boonton Fayne and her daughter George Fayne, as well as the young woman known as Carol Wipple, shall select by mutual consent and in the order named one article of furniture from my belongings as a permanent keepsake.' "

"Oh, Nancy, he didn't forget me!" Carol whispered.

" 'Excepting,' " Mr. Drew continued with emphasis, " 'the portrait of my late, beloved wife, which will be disposed of hereinafter.

" 'I then direct that all my other property be converted into cash by legal sale at the best current price as soon as possible after my death.' "

There followed a list of items to be sold. The house, with four hundred acres of surrounding land, headed the list. Then came a piece of valuable real estate in the heart of the River Heights business

district. Two bank accounts and a quantity of stocks and bonds were mentioned.

Mr. Drew read on, " 'The bankbooks, deeds, receipts, and some of the securities are in a black wooden chest bound in brass on the lid of which is my name.'"

Nancy glanced at her father. How glad she was that she had rescued it!

" 'I further direct,' " the will stated, "that the money realized from these shall be divided into nine equal parts.' "

At this, all the relatives sat up straight, and calculating looks were exchanged among the possible heirs.

" 'One share shall again be divided into seven equal parts,' " Mr. Drew continued solemnly, and the now-bewildered relatives sat further forward on their chairs. " 'One of these shares, that is, one sixty-third of the entire estate, shall be given to Frank Jemitt and his wife Emma in consideration of those days a few years ago during which they served me honestly and well.' "

For a moment all eyes turned to the couple. So Asa Sidney did suspect them of recent thefts!

" 'One each of the remaining sub-shares, namely one sixty-third of the entire estate, shall be given to each of my relatives, namely Jacob Sidney, Peter Boonton, Anna Marvin, Bess Marvin, Louise Fayne, and George Fayne.

" 'All the rest of the money, to wit, eight-ninths of the cash proceeds of the estate, shall be given to the girl known as Carol Wipple, who shall also inherit the portrait of my wife—' "

A concerted growl of disapproval arose from the disappointed heirs as Nancy cried out in alarm:

"Carol has fainted!"

CHAPTER XII

The Mysterious Attic

"GET a glass of water!" Raymond Hill called to Frank Jemitt, who did not look as angered and disappointed as Asa Sidney's relatives.

Jemitt hurried to the kitchen and returned with a tumbler of water. Nancy moistened a handkerchief and laid it on Carol's forehead. Then she massaged the back of her neck and wrists.

Carol stirred and sat up. "I—I must have fainted," she murmured. "Oh, Nancy, there you are. Please don't go away."

No one else offered to help; they sat still and waited. But finally Jacob Sidney exclaimed, "We'll fight this out in court!"

"You bet we will," Peter Boonton seconded. "There isn't a court in the world that will uphold this will. Asa Sidney couldn't have been in his right mind when he cheated his own relatives and left most of his estate to a stranger!"

Mr. Drew made no reply to the threats. Instead, he went on reading.

"'I direct my sole executor, Carson Drew, to have the Fernwood Orphanage review Carol Wipple's case, and if in their judgment they find Frank and Emma Jemitt unfit to continue as her foster parents, that it assign new foster parents to her.' "

"Oh!" Carol cried out. For a second, Nancy thought she was going to faint again.

"That's ridiculous!" Frank Jemitt burst out. "We've always been kind and gentle to Carol and given her a good home."

"We sure have," his wife added. "Why, Carol, you wouldn't think of letting anyone take you from us, would you?"

Nancy was disgusted by this sudden attitude of pretended affection and hoped Carol would not be influenced by it.

Mr. Drew had not finished. After completing the reading of the will, he said, "Mr. Asa Sidney told me that he had a special reason for remembering Carol in his will. At the time he was too tired to tell me about it but promised to give me the whole story later. Unfortunately he never had a chance."

Everyone looked at Carol, and Jacob Sidney shouted, “What did he mean?”

“I—I don’t know,” Carol faltered. “He was kind to me and I did what I could for him.”

The relatives arose in a body, ignored the girl, barely nodded to the others in the room and left the old mansion. Nancy was incensed by their attitude and deeply hurt by the actions of Bess and George.

As soon as they had gone, and Mr. Drew had walked into the hall with Mr. Hill, Nancy said to Carol, “This has been a hard day for you. Why don’t you go up to your room and lie down?”

“Oh, Nancy, I’d only think more if I did that.”

“Of course you would,” Mrs. Jemitt spoke up. “What you need is a mother’s tender loving care. Come with me.”

“No, no!” Carol objected, clinging to Nancy.

The Jemitts went off. Hannah Gruen appeared and urged Carol and Nancy to have some tea and toast in the kitchen.

“All right,” Carol agreed. “And I’ll tell you about the will, Mrs. Gruen. Oh, I suppose I’ll be rich but it scares me.”

Nancy said good-by to her father and Mr. Hill, then joined Carol and Hannah. After the men had driven off, she began to wonder where the Jemitts were.

“I think I’ll prowl around a bit,” she told the others.

Nancy went quietly to the second floor. Seeing no one, she continued to the tower room. Frank Jemitt was crouched at the door, studying the official padlock placed there by the sheriff. The flashlight in his hand cast flickering shadows on the white walls.

“Oh, there you are, Mr. Jemitt,” Nancy said pleasantly.

The startled man wheeled on his heels. “I—I was just making sure none of the relatives had sneaked up here to burglarize the place,” he stammered.

“And did you find everything secure?”

“Oh yes,” he growled, and rushed down the stairs past the girl.

Nancy followed Jemitt to the second floor and saw him enter his bedroom. She went into her own room but left the door ajar. A few minutes later he came out with Mrs. Jemitt. The couple hurried to the first floor and out the front door.

Nancy returned to Carol and Hannah, and suggested that the two girls stroll around the grounds. The back lawn was weedy and littered, and the ramshackle old barn gave the garden a shabby appearance.

A flicker of light inside the barn aroused Nancy's suspicions. Taking Carol by the hand, she led her into the nearby woods.

"Let's watch the barn from here," she said, "where we won't be noticed. I want to see if Jemitt brings anything outside."

At that instant Jemitt stepped from the building and surveyed the house and yard. Then he ducked back inside. Presently he emerged with two long boxes which he carried with difficulty.

"He's going away from the road," Nancy muttered. "What's at the rear of the property, Carol?"

"Just pastures and meadows and the old tenant farmer's house," Carol whispered.

"We'll follow Jemitt," Nancy decided. "Can we get to that house without leaving the woods?"

"There's a roundabout way," Carol said. "I'll show you."

Stepping carefully so as not to cause any sound, the two girls made their way among the trees. Soon Jemitt was out of sight, but still Nancy urged Carol on, convinced that the deserted tenant house was the man's goal. After ten minutes of difficult going, Carol stopped and pointed.

"There's the old tenant house," she said. "And, Nancy, you uncanny mind reader, my foster father's just leaving it!"

"And without the boxes!" Nancy added. "We'll wait until he's gone and then search the place."

The building smelled musty and dirty. Inside, the light from the setting sun shone dimly through cobwebby, dusty windows. The floor was thick with debris and fallen plaster.

"See these footprints. They go directly upstairs," Nancy remarked.

The two girls crept up the creaking, wobbly old steps, their hearts thumping with excitement. The second floor was merely an unplastered attic. A rusted iron bed stood under the eaves, and an antique wardrobe, its doors awry and its once fine mahogany surface green with mildew, leaned against the chimney.

Nancy looked into the huge piece of furniture. "All the shelves have been taken away!" she observed. "The wardrobe's empty."

Nancy turned to examine the floor. She became interested in part of a plank that had less litter on it than the others.

"It's getting late," Carol murmured nervously.

"We'll go in a minute," Nancy said.

She knelt and with her slim fingertips drew the loose nails from the wide floorboard and pulled it up.

Carol gasped! Four boxes were revealed, two of them obviously the ones Jemitt had just brought. Nancy stooped to throw back the lid of one when a step creaked on the stairway. Someone was coming!

"It must be Father Jemitt!" Carol chattered, clutching at Nancy.

"This way, quick!" Nancy said.

She pushed Carol into the moldering old wardrobe, crowded in beside her, and pulled the doors as nearly shut as possible. The stairs continued to creak as someone slowly mounted them. Carol gripped Nancy's arm, trembling violently. A shadowy figure appeared at the head of the steps and paused to survey the attic.

"That isn't Father Jemitt," Carol whispered. "This man's too tall."

"Sh!" Nancy warned.

He entered the attic and gave a start upon seeing the displaced floorboard. The newcomer stooped to look into the opening, and evidently lifted the lids of the boxes.

Then he straightened up and scanned the entire room. As his face was revealed in the dim light, Nancy almost gave a startled exclamation. The man was Raymond Hill, the banker from Smith's Ferry!

What was he doing here? Had he betrayed Carson Drew's trust and confidence? Had the lure of old Asa's fortune overcome his scruples, too? Nancy was tense as these questions raced through her mind.

Meanwhile, Mr. Hill paced slowly around the attic. Nancy was certain he would eventually pull open the doors of the antique wardrobe and find the two girls.

A plank creaked under Mr. Hill's feet and he stopped, bent down, and gave a little chuckle. Nancy saw him pry the nails loose and lift the board. He reached into the opening and pulled out a metal box used for filing valuable documents.

Mr. Hill opened it and took a bundle of papers from it. Nancy guessed they were stock certificates. He looked through them, stuffed

the bundle into his pocket, and replaced the loose flooring, after kicking the box out of sight.

Now Mr. Hill's eyes roved about the attic and at last fastened on the old wardrobe. He began to walk toward it slowly, testing the planks beneath his feet at every step.

Nancy was thinking fast. Should she emerge from her hiding place or gamble that Mr. Hill would not open the wardrobe?

A sinister sight interrupted her thoughts. Standing at the head of the steps, up which he had crept with practiced caution, was Frank Jemitt! His eyes gleamed unbelievingly as he watched Mr. Hill's movements closely.

At that moment the banker glanced about the attic once more. Nancy saw him stiffen when he detected the other man.

"Mr. Jemitt!" the banker said, unruffled. "What are you bringing up here now to hide? Come, let me see it!"

Jemitt mounted the top step and strode toward Mr. Hill. In his arms was something tightly wrapped in newspapers.

"I don't know why you're here trespassing," Jemitt snarled. "But if you want to see what I have, here it is!"

To Nancy's horror, he hurled his burden full force at Mr. Hill. The paper fell off, revealing a square metal box. The banker ducked but a corner of the box caught his shoulder, causing him to lose his balance and almost fall.

That was the advantage Jemitt wanted. He rushed forward with flailing fists. Mr. Hill threw up his arms to protect his face. Jemitt thrust out a foot and sent the tall man sprawling onto his back.

In a flash Jemitt was on top of him. One hand gripped Mr. Hill's throat, while the other pounded his face and head.

"You coward!" Nancy exclaimed, and burst from the wardrobe. "Stop that!"

She flew at Jemitt and seized his shirt collar at the back with both hands to drag him away.

CHAPTER XIII

Fleeing Suspects

"WHO'S that? What are—?" Jemitt choked.

He craned his neck, and when he saw that Nancy was his new opponent he bared his teeth and snarled, "Let go of me, or I'll do worse than this to you."

Nancy's response was to twist her fingers deeper into the man's collar and tug harder. Realizing that he had an unexpected ally, Mr. Hill squirmed free of Jemitt's grasp and drove his fist deep into the innkeeper's stomach.

The man doubled over with a gasp, the breath knocked out of him. Mr. Hill arose, his clothing dirty and rumpled, his face rapidly swelling with bruises.

"Why, Nancy! And Carol! How did you get here?" the banker gasped.

"We were here first," Nancy said. "We heard you coming, and not knowing who it was we hid in the wardrobe."

"You saved me from this madman!" Mr. Hill said. "Say, did you pull up that loose plank over there?"

"Yes," Nancy replied. "We were just going to look in the boxes when you frightened us off."

Mr. Hill shook his head and smiled weakly. "Nancy, your father sent me back to help you hunt for more of Asa Sidney's fortune, but it was you who saved the day for me! I saw Jemitt coming from this house and traced his path to find out what he was up to—and you know the rest!" Nancy chided herself for her earlier suspicions of Raymond Hill's integrity.

Jemitt, clutching his middle, rose shakily to his feet. "Carol," he said, "shall I call the police and have this man arrested for trespassing?"

"Arrest me?" the banker shouted.

"Arrest Mr. Hill? Why?" Carol and Nancy gasped in unison.

“For trying to steal old man Sidney’s valuables, of course,” Jemitt replied. “Why else do you think he was poking around here where Mr. Sidney used to hide his things?”

“Of all the false statements!” the banker bellowed. “You’re the thief!”

“Ha-ha! Deny if you can that you took a bunch of bonds from under the floor and have them in your pocket this minute!” Jemitt challenged.

“I don’t deny it, and here they are,” Mr. Hill declared, disclosing the securities. “I didn’t steal them. Whoever hid them there stole them.”

“Tell that to the judge!” the innkeeper jeered. “Old Asa hid them there himself! Come along, Carol. Both these smart crooks are trying to rob you of your inheritance. I’ll drive you to town and ask for a detective to guard you. And we’ll hunt up a lawyer without a smarty daughter.”

“No, I don’t want to be with you again,” Carol cried. “Go away, please, and stay away!”

“You’ll be sorry someday you said that.” Jemitt gave a forced laugh. “When these new friends of yours have stripped you of everything you own, you’ll come around begging Frank and Emma to be good to you again.”

Nancy looked sternly at Jemitt. “How about that ebony box with brass bindings that you buried under a woodpile?” she asked. “It might mean that any visits you’ll have from Carol will be in the state penitentiary!”

Jemitt opened his mouth as if to retort, but instead turned and walked down the dark stairs.

“We must find out where he’s going!” Nancy said, stooping to pick up the box Jemitt had hurled at Mr. Hill. “And I’ll call my Dad and report to him.”

Mr. Hill took the box from Nancy, and suggested they should also remove the other boxes from under the floorboards. They lifted them out and started for the house.

“I’ll give you a receipt for these and put them in the bank vault,” he said to Nancy. “They certainly aren’t safe here.”

“But the bank isn’t open,” Nancy told him.

“It will be until seven this evening.”

Mr. Hill and the girls trailed Jemitt across the meadow to the

Sidney mansion. When they arrived, Hannah said he and his wife had gone to their room.

Nancy nodded. “I’ll phone Dad and tell him what happened.”

“Then I’ll call my chauffeur,” Mr. Hill told her.

She ran to the telephone booth and called her home. No one answered, so Nancy tried her father’s office. His secretary was still there and explained she was working late.

“Mr. Drew went out of town in connection with the Sidney case, and won’t be back until tomorrow afternoon,” she said. “That’s why he sent Mr. Hill out to see if you were all right.”

“Thank you,” said Nancy. “We’re having an exciting time but we’re all okay.”

Mr. Hill made his call and in a short time was ready to leave. “I think,” he said, “that I’d better come back here tonight and keep an eye on things.”

Nancy smiled. “Oh, would you? We’ll have dinner ready by that time.”

Carol insisted upon helping. Mrs. Gruen remarked that the Jemitts also should be offering to do their share.

“They’ll get hungry some time,” the Drews’ housekeeper said. “Then we’ll see them.”

Nancy had chosen to set the table in the dining room so she could watch the couple come downstairs. But half an hour went by and they did not appear. Uneasy, Nancy decided to go upstairs and speak to them. She found their door wide open and the closet stripped of clothes. On a hunch Nancy pulled out several bureau drawers. There was nothing in them!

“They’ve gone!” she thought in dismay. “No telling what they took with them!”

Nancy fairly flew to the first floor and burst into the kitchen. “The Jemitts have moved out!” she exclaimed.

“What!” said Hannah Gruen. “But how could they without our seeing them?”

Carol sank into a chair. “It’s all my fault. I’ve made such a mess of everything!” she wailed. “Th-the Jemitts must have used the back stairway.”

She explained that since several steps on it needed repairing, the

stairway was never used. At the top and bottom, planks had been laid across and curtains hung at the back. The spaces were used as closets.

"Please show me," Nancy requested.

She and Hannah followed the girl to a rear hall which opened onto a porch. Carol grasped the handle of an inside door and turned it. A curtain three feet beyond had been shoved aside, revealing a stairway. There was no doubt but that the Jemitts had used it in their secret getaway.

"I wonder how much of Asa Sidney's property they took," Mrs. Gruen remarked grimly.

Carol shuddered at the remark. "You really think they have stolen *more* of Mr. Sidney's possessions?"

Nancy nodded. "It's a good possibility." A determined look spread over her face. "I'm going to find those people!"

Hannah smiled. "I'm sure nobody wants them back, but as foster parents they did abandon a minor, and are liable."

"Carol, is there a big flashlight around?" Nancy asked.

"Yes, in the kitchen."

"We'll need it. Carol, you help me. Hannah, please guard the house," Nancy directed.

The two girls rushed outside just in time to meet Mr. Hill walking in. His chauffeur was driving off. Quickly Nancy explained what had happened and the three rushed to the garage. As they had expected, the Jemitts' car was gone.

"We didn't hear the motor," Nancy said, "so it's my guess the Jemitts pushed the car out to the road before starting it. Let's take mine and try to catch them!"

She had parked her convertible in the driveway, near the far corner of the inn. When they reached the car, all of them gasped in dismay. Both rear tires had been slashed.

"How awful!" Carol exclaimed.

"And I have only one spare tire," Nancy said, vexed with herself because the Jemitts had outwitted her. An idea came to her. "The tire-cutting was probably done to prevent pursuit," she said. "Or maybe the Jemitts wanted to make us believe pursuit is necessary, but actually they're not far away!"

She turned to Mr. Hill. "What was in the boxes you took to the bank

besides the securities?"

"A large collection of sterling silver," he replied. "I'm sure that old tenant house is filled with loot."

"Then that's where the Jemitts would go first," Nancy said with conviction. She took a large portable spotlight from her car trunk. "Let's hurry to the tenant house," she urged.

The three strode off through the meadows to the old cottage. Nancy was somewhat disappointed to find it in darkness.

"They got here ahead of us," Mr. Hill commented. "That is, if they came here at all."

"Let's wait a few minutes," Nancy said, putting out the light.

They stood in silence close to a towering sycamore tree, their forms blending with the light, mottled background of the trunk. At last Nancy's keen ears heard a sound that was different from the noises of the meadow insects. It had a metallic ring and was muffled and distant.

Instantly she switched on her spotlight, and the beam cut through the blackness. The tumble-down tenant house sprang into view, and on the rickety front steps Frank and Emma Jemitt were etched sharply in the glare. He was carrying a long, narrow box over one shoulder. His wife held a pair of ornate silver candelabra.

"Call to them that the house is guarded and that they must leave anything they have removed," Nancy whispered to Mr. Hill. "Try to disguise your voice."

Raymond Hill chuckled, cleared his throat, and then in a resounding voice shouted the warning Nancy had requested.

"Who are you, anyhow?" Jemitt yelled back. "I got a right to be here!"

"Stand where you are!" Mr. Hill commanded.

Jemitt gave an ugly laugh in response and moved a step lower.

"If we could frighten them," whispered Nancy, "with a loud noise, such as—"

"Um—yes."

Nancy picked up a stone. "I wonder—"

Mr. Hill quickly sensed her thought, grabbed the rock, then with a fling sent it toward the cottage at a swift pace. There was the crash of glass as a front window shattered into splinters.

Jemitt picked up the box, leaped off the steps, and ran into the darkness. Mrs. Jemitt screamed and dashed after her husband. Nancy kept the spotlight on the panic-stricken pair as they charged through the brush and meadow grass toward the road.

“We must stop them and see what’s in their car!” Nancy exclaimed.

She led the others, but the chase proved hopeless. Halfway up the road they heard the roar of a motor and a car speed off.

“I think,” said Mr. Hill as the three retraced their steps, “that as soon as dinner is over, I’d better come back to the tenant house and guard it. In fact, this would give me a chance to do some more searching.”

Carol shyly offered an army cot and blankets from the inn.

“I accept,” the banker said. “And I’ll take a flashlight too.”

After finishing the delicious dinner Hannah had prepared, Mr. Hill left. Nancy could not get her mind off the Jemitts and finally phoned her friend Police Chief McGinnis in River Heights and told him the story.

“We must stop them!” Nancy exclaimed

“I’m glad you called me,” the officer said. “This is serious. My men will be alerted to watch for the Jemitts. If they’re located, the car will be searched. The sign of the twisted candles on anything they find will identify it as Asa Sidney’s property.”

Mrs. Gruen had already insisted that the exhausted and weepy Carol go to bed. When Nancy went up to say good night to her, the girl was sound asleep.

Nancy returned to the first floor just in time to answer the telephone. A male voice asked, “Is Miss Nancy Drew there?”

The young detective’s face broke into a wide smile. “Hi, Ned!” she exclaimed.

“For Pete’s sake, Nancy, I’ve been trying for days to get you. What’s the idea of hiding?”

“Oh, Ned, I have so much to tell you. When can you leave your job and come down so I can talk to you?”

“Camp closes tomorrow. I should be home the next day. By the way, what’s up between you and Bess? When I couldn’t get your house I called her to find out where you were. Boy, she was about as friendly as an ice cube!”

“I’ll tell you when I see you,” Nancy answered. “You’d better call me again before you leave, Ned. I may go home.”

“Okay. Be good. By now.”

“By.”

After the dinner dishes had been washed and put away, Nancy and Hannah Gruen sat down in the living room to talk. The conversation turned to possible treasures hidden in the house.

“One place old-timers always hid things was in chimneys,” the Drews’ housekeeper remarked.

“There are several in this house,” Nancy said. Jumping up, she added, “Let’s investigate the one in here first.”

Nancy brought her flashlight and looked up inside the chimney. She could see nothing because the damper was closed. Noting a hook, Nancy gave it a yank. The next moment a shower of black soot and debris sprayed down over her.

Hannah Gruen gasped. Then the next second she cried out, “Ugh! Bats!”

CHAPTER XIV

An Embarrassing Meeting

AFRAID to open her eyes Nancy stepped from the fireplace and felt for a handkerchief from her pocket. Hannah kept crying, “Bats! Bats! Look out, Nancy! They may bite you!”

Nancy could hardly see but realized that two bats were whizzing around the room. Apparently they were confused by their sudden exit into the lighted room from the dark chimney. Mrs. Gruen, who had flipped the back of her skirt over her head, was rushing to the front door, which she flung open.

“Get out! Shoo!” she cried out.

By now Nancy had wiped the soot from her eyes and joined Hannah in trying to force the bats from the house. Finally the housekeeper ran outside. Nancy followed and in a minute the flying mammals came too. Nancy and Hannah hurried back inside.

“Thank goodness they’ve gone!” Hannah said. “And now, Nancy, you’d better go upstairs for a bath and a shampoo while I clean up that mess in the living room.”

Nancy needed no urging. She shook off as much soot as possible, then went upstairs. At last, too weary for further treasure hunting, she went to bed.

Carol was both alarmed and amused by Nancy’s story of the bats the next morning, and for the first time in days a smile came over her pale face. “I can just see you standing there, black from head to foot.”

Nancy laughed. “I’ll confine my hunting to cleaner spots.”

As the girls helped Mrs. Gruen prepare breakfast, they saw Mr. Hill striding toward the house.

“Good morning!” the banker hailed them. “All quiet at the tenant house last night. Any excitement here?”

“Plenty,” Nancy replied, and told him about the chimney episode. He laughed heartily.

Soon the four were enjoying a hearty breakfast.

"I'll have to go to the bank," Mr. Hill said presently. "My chauffeur will call for me, and then I'll send him back to stand guard at the tenant house."

"We'll stay here in the inn," Nancy told him. "As soon as my father returns I'll ask him to station two watchmen here, one to relieve your chauffeur. Then Mrs. Gruen and I will go home and take Carol with us."

"An excellent plan—the best possible under the circumstances," Mr. Hill declared. "Nancy, you certainly won a major battle of wits against the Jemitts at the tenant house last night."

The banker's car arrived shortly, and he rode off. In less than an hour the chauffeur was back with new tires for Nancy's car. He deftly put them on before taking up guard duty at the old cottage.

At noontime Nancy telephoned her father's office and learned that he had just returned. Swiftly she outlined the events of the preceding day, and he promised that precautions such as Nancy suggested would be taken. At one o'clock an automobile drove up. In it with Mr. Drew were two muscular men.

"Private detectives," the lawyer said briefly to Nancy.

He posted one man at the inn, the other at the tenant house. The guards were to be replaced by another duo at midnight.

"Now, Carol, pack your things and we'll take off," Nancy said. "Our worries are over for the time being."

While Carol was packing, Mr. Drew told Nancy that the Sidney-Boonton families had engaged a lawyer to fight Carol's inheritance from Asa Sidney.

"That's a contest where I can't help you, can I?" Nancy asked. "I wish I were old enough to be a lawyer!"

"You've already done a fine job," her father said. "And I'm sure we'll win the lawsuit. It would help very much, though, if we had some supportable testimony as to why Mr. Sidney favored this orphan girl above his entire family."

They stopped speaking as Carol came down the stairway wearing a shabby coat and carrying an old-fashioned suitcase. She apologized for both. "I never went anywhere, and wore uniforms most of the time, so I didn't need any clothes."

This gave Nancy an idea. "Carol," she said, "you deserve a good-looking wardrobe. Let's go downtown on a shopping spree! I have charge accounts, and you can pay me back when you receive

allowances from your inheritance. We'll buy dresses and shoes, and a coat, and—"

"Oh, I can't believe it!" Carol exclaimed. "This could be the biggest thrill of my life!"

"It'll be a lot of fun for me, too," Nancy declared as she locked the front door and gave the key to the watchman. "Let's go now."

She took Hannah home first, then set off for the shopping center of River Heights. As Nancy led Carol into the elevator of a big department store, she discovered that the only other occupants were Bess and George!

The two cousins smiled timidly at the other girls. Then, as if remembering that they were told not to be friendly, they turned aside.

Impulsively Nancy put her hand on Bess's arm. "Bess," she said softly, "I've done nothing. Why must our friendship be broken because of a foolish quarrel that persons now dead had seventy years ago?"

To Nancy's surprise a big tear rolled down Bess's cheek. George bit her lip nervously, glancing from Bess to Nancy.

"We can't help it, Nancy," she said finally. "Your father is responsible for keeping our family from its rightful share in Asa Sidney's estate."

"Oh no!" Nancy said. "Lets talk this over," she suggested. "In the tearoom."

Hesitatingly the cousins agreed, and soon the four girls were seated in a quiet corner of the store's restaurant.

"Bess, you and George met Carol the same evening I did," Nancy began. "It was the first time we three had seen Mr. Sidney."

Bess and George nodded, and Nancy continued, "I mentioned that my father was a lawyer and that night Carol phoned me and said Mr. Sidney wanted to make a new will and would Dad come to draw it the next morning. Mr. Sidney seemed perfectly competent to me. He didn't appear to you to be unbalanced, did he?"

Bess and George looked at each other uncomfortably, then shook their heads.

"It's my father's duty to carry out his client's wishes," Nancy went on. "Well, that's my story. Carol's is just as simple. Mr. Sidney chose to make her one of his heirs. It hasn't brought her happiness because of the way your family and the others are treating her."

"That's true," Carol said.

“The family feud should not interfere with our friendship,” Nancy went on. “Why let the anger of great-uncles come between us?”

“Nancy,” George declared, “you’re absolutely right. I’m sorry and ashamed of the way I’ve acted. Please forgive me. I want to be friends.”

“Oh, Nancy,” Bess cried, “I’m so glad we’re talking to one another again. And, Carol, I’m not going to do anything to break the will.”

“I’m not either,” George added quickly.

Nancy laughed in relief and the others joined in.

“What are you girls shopping for?” George asked. “We always have so much fun buying things with Nancy.”

“Carol wants to get some new clothes,” Nancy explained. “Want to help?”

“You bet!” Bess and George answered.

When the store closed that evening, the four girls left it chatting merrily and laden with bundles. Carol had been outfitted from head to toe in attractive clothes. Her hair had been trimmed and modishly combed at the beauty salon. She looked very lovely and seemed to have gained self-confidence.

But she was not yet entirely at ease. On the way home, she whispered to Nancy, “Please don’t go far from me. I’m so afraid the Jemitts may try to harm me. Nancy, do you mind if I don’t go back yet to the old mansion to hunt for the hidden treasures?”

“Of course not, Carol. I think you’ll be happier at my house with Mrs. Gruen. Just take it easy, and don’t worry.”

Mr. Drew reached home at six o’clock and soon everyone sat down to dinner. Conversation was general, but as soon as the meal was over, he asked his daughter to follow him into his study. He closed the door and they sat down.

“Nancy,” he said, “I have a lot to tell you. There’s no use upsetting Carol. That’s why I wanted to talk to you alone. A theory has been forming in my mind.”

“About Carol’s background?”

“Yes.”

“You suspect Asa Sidney knew who she was?”

The lawyer nodded. “I made a trip to the Fernwood Orphanage and looked at all the old records. There was not a clue as to who Carol’s

parents might have been. But I did pick up some other interesting facts."

Mr. Drew said that Asa Sidney had been a trustee of the orphanage for many years. He had taken a great fancy to a certain little girl who had been given the name Sadie Wipple and he insisted it be changed to Carol. The name of the child he had lost was Carol.

"Then when the Jemitts, who owned a small restaurant, offered to become foster parents, Mr. Sidney would not give his consent unless the Jemitts agreed to come to his home and work. Frank and Emma did not want to be servants, so the arrangement about the tearoom and the promise of a share in Asa's will was worked out."

Nancy was intrigued by this information. "Dad, do you think that if Mr. Sidney had lived he would have told you everything?"

"I believe so. Now, unfortunately, we'll have to unearth the secret ourselves. And if we don't, I'm afraid those grasping relatives will take the case to court."

"Two of the heirs aren't going to join in," Nancy said with a chuckle, and told about being on friendly terms again with Bess and George.

"Well, my congratulations," her father said. "I wish your influence could extend to their parents and great-uncles. By the way, my main reason for going to the Fernwood Orphanage was to tell the directors of the request in Asa Sidney's will that the Jemitts be investigated and probably new foster parents be obtained for Carol."

"But now the Jemitts have run away," Nancy reminded her father.

"That in itself will be enough to take Carol away from them," the lawyer said. "I'll phone the orphanage and ask permission to keep her here until they decide about new foster parents."

"I'm sure the Jemitts will be back," Nancy remarked. "Either to get things they've cached away, or to hunt for others."

"By the way," Mr. Drew said, "I was able to get a court order freezing the contents of those cartons Jemitt stored in the warehouse."

As he finished speaking, Nancy stiffened in her chair. She had just seen a menacing face at the partially opened window.

CHAPTER XV

Candles' Secrets

"WHAT'S the matter?" Mr. Drew asked, turning so he too could look out the window.

"I saw Frank Jemitt looking in!" Nancy exclaimed.

She and her father rushed outdoors to accost the man, but could not find him. Mr. Drew was worried that Jemitt had overheard the conversation between Nancy and himself and might use it to his own advantage.

"How?" Nancy asked.

"By conniving with the relatives and threatening Carol."

To avoid similar incidents in the future, Mr. Drew requested that all the windows in the house be closed and locked, and the air-conditioning system turned on.

"I don't think," said Nancy, "we should worry Carol with all this." Her father agreed.

Their guest slept well. As soon as she came downstairs, Carol insisted upon being given some household chores. "I'm so used to work I wouldn't know what to do with myself."

Mr. Drew smiled at her. "I suggest that you help Mrs. Gruen and in between jobs do a lot of reading. By the way, Carol, you want to go back to school, don't you?"

"Oh yes."

"I think," the lawyer went on, "that we should look for a good boarding school for you. Of course the orphanage and your new foster parents will have to decide which one."

Carol was silent for several seconds. Then she said, "I suppose so. But I'll hate leaving the nice new friends I've made." She looked wistfully at Nancy, who smiled encouragingly.

"You can visit us."

The telephone rang. Nancy answered it. "Oh hi, Ned!"

He asked if she would be free for lunch. “I’d like to take you out and maybe you could show me that mysterious old inn. How’s the case progressing?”

“It’s a long story. I’ll tell you when I see you,” she replied.

“See you at twelve.”

Nancy explained to Carol that Ned was a student at Emerson College and they had been dating for some time. “Maybe I’ll ask Bess and George to come over and keep you company.”

Carol shook her head. “Nancy, I’d just like to be quiet, and—and bake a surprise for your dinner tonight.”

“That would be great,” Nancy said. “May I guess what it’ll be?”

The other girl smiled. “I’ll tell you the name but you’ll never guess what it is. Ever hear of Butterfly Pie?”

“No.” Nancy laughed. “Sounds alive. I’ll look forward to it.”

Ned arrived promptly and drove Nancy to a country restaurant. Tables surrounded a pool.

“How about a swim first?” he suggested. “We can rent some gear.”

She agreed and they spent half an hour in the water. While they ate, Nancy brought Ned up to date on the mystery.

“Let’s go to the inn and do some searching,” he proposed.

“All right. Any place except the tower room. It has been sealed by the sheriff’s office. The watchman has keys to the house.”

When they arrived at the mansion the guard greeted Nancy. She introduced Ned and said they would like to go in and look around.

“I’ll let you in, but I sure had a bad time with those two other guys and that couple when I told ’em No.”

“Who were they?” Nancy asked.

“I don’t know.” His description of them fitted Jacob Sidney, Peter Boonton, and the Jemitts. “They all wanted to look in the tower room.”

“Is the other guard still at the tenant house?” Nancy asked.

“Why no. Didn’t you hear that your father dismissed him?”

Nancy was astounded. She had a strong hunch this was not true. As soon as the front door was opened, she dashed to the telephone to call Mr. Drew. To her dismay she found that the cord had been cut in half!

"Ned, come here!" she called.

He gazed at the severed cord critically. "Vandalism all right. Whom do you suspect?"

Nancy said she was sure Jemitt was responsible. "When the guard was around the corner, Jemitt let himself into the house. To avoid arrest if detected, he made it impossible for anyone to phone."

"What about the other guard?" Ned asked. "Do you think Jemitt faked a note to get rid of him?"

"Yes."

Ned suggested that they report the damage to the telephone company at once. "Let's drive to the nearest phone right now."

"You go," Nancy said. "I'd like to look around here."

Left alone, Nancy went from room to room. Nothing on the first floor seemed to have been disturbed. She figured that probably the Jemitts had already removed any visible expensive objects. She hurried to the second floor and peered into one room after another. When Nancy reached the room she had occupied, the young sleuth stopped short.

On the bed lay a man bound and gagged! His eyes were closed. Apparently he was asleep, because he did not move.

Nancy tiptoed over. He was Jacob Sidney! Quickly she pulled off the gag. The motion aroused the man, who seemed to be dazed. But finally his eyes fastened on the young detective.

"You!" he said in a hoarse whisper. "How did I get here?"

"I don't know. I just found you. What happened?"

"Untie me and I'll tell you."

Nancy did not trust Jacob Sidney. Why was he in this house that he was not supposed to enter? She would wait until Ned's return.

"First tell me how you got in here," Nancy said.

Grudgingly he admitted trying the door when the guard's back was turned. "I found it unlocked and slipped in. I thought I'd better come here and —and protect my inheritance," he added lamely. "Suddenly somebody hit me from the back and that's all I remember."

There was the sound of approaching footsteps. Ned walked in and Nancy signaled him not to act too startled.

Jacob Sidney, apparently mistaking Ned for a plainclothes police

detective, said, “I had a right to be here, Officer. I’ve inherited part of this property.”

As Ned leaned over and untied the man’s bonds, Nancy said, “This is Mr. Jacob Sidney.”

“Well, Mr. Sidney,” Ned remarked, “I advise you to leave at once and not come back.”

“I will, I will,” the crestfallen intruder said.

He got up stiffly, went down the stairs, and out the front door. Not until he was outside did Nancy and Ned burst into laughter.

Ned remarked, “I guess that snoopy beneficiary won’t be back in a hurry.”

“Not with you around, Officer,” said Nancy.

“I got your father,” Ned reported. “He certainly didn’t dismiss the guard, and is sending the man back. A repairman from the phone company will be here to replace the cord. Probably the person who cut the cord is responsible for the dismissal of the watchman and the knockout blow to Jacob Sidney.”

“Let’s see what other damage he may have caused,” Nancy suggested.

They opened closet doors and Nancy even investigated the camouflaged back stairway, but found nothing suspicious. She showed Ned the hidden ornate music box before they began a hunt for other treasures.

“I’m to look for the sign of a twisted candle?” Ned asked.

“Uh-huh,” she answered.

Every panel in the ceilings, walls, and floorboards was carefully examined. The couple became separated and there was not a sound for nearly half an hour.

Then Ned cried out, “Nancy! Come here! I think I’ve found something!”

She ran to his side in the rear hall. “Look! The grass cloth on this wall is a little different from the rest and a twisted candle has been carefully worked into the design. Do you think it means anything?”

Nancy ran her fingers over the rough fabric. “It’s lumpy underneath!” she said excitedly. “Ned, we should investigate!”

For a moment Nancy wondered if they should tear off the wall covering. “It’s old and faded, anyway,” she told Ned.

He agreed. “We’ll use my penknife and be as careful as possible,” he said.

Inch by inch he felt the lumpy area and cut around it. Then he peeled off the grass cloth.

“A safe!” Nancy exclaimed.

“Right,” said Ned. “And how are we going to find out the combination to it?” He grinned. “One thing I haven’t learned is how to be a safe-cracker.”

Nancy laughed, then reached up and tried the recessed knob. To her amazement it turned!

“Oh, Ned, the safe isn’t locked!”

In a moment the door was open. The couple peered inside.

“Swords!” said Ned.

He lifted one out. It was encrusted with jewels and evidently very old and valuable. Five others were examined, each one ornate.

“Well, your Asa Sidney was a collector,” Ned remarked, “and I must say he had good taste. What are you going to do with these?”

Nancy did not know. “I suppose they shouldn’t be moved, but I’m afraid to leave them. They may be stolen.”

“Perhaps we can put back the grass cloth so the cuts won’t be noticeable,” Ned suggested.

The swords were replaced and the safe shut. Putting back the frail grass cloth was a tedious job. Nancy had noticed a jar of paste in the room Carol had occupied. She went to get it, then worked with Ned for some time. Finally Nancy felt that the repair would suffice until the authorities came to appraise the estate.

“Where do we look next?” Ned asked. “This is a lot more exciting than my job was as camp counselor.”

“Please don’t tell anyone what you found,” Nancy cautioned.

“Why, Miss Drew,” Ned said, “do you think you should address an ‘officer’ that way?”

The two burst into laughter, recalling Jacob Sidney’s mistaken impression. Then they became serious.

“I think we’ve done enough for one visit,” Nancy said. “But before we leave I want to go upstairs and see if the lock is intact on the door to the tower room.”

She went up the steps, followed by Ned.

“This sure is a spooky old house,” he remarked. “I wouldn’t want to live in it.”

“But great for a mystery,” Nancy said. “Well, nobody has managed to remove this seal, but I’m sure it has been tampered with. I must—”

At that moment a frightful howl echoed through the old inn. Then came a reverberating crash!

CHAPTER XVI

The Ruse

THE crash and ear-piercing yell startled Nancy and Ned.

"What was that?" he asked. "It sounded right outside!"

They both went to the stairway window and struggled to lift the stiff, warped sash.

Nancy leaned out. "Oh!" she cried. "A man's on the porch roof with a ladder on top of him!"

Ned looked down. "It isn't the guard," he said. "Who can he be?"

"We'd better run down," Nancy suggested, "and help the poor man."

The couple raced down the steps to the second floor and made their way to a front room, whose windows opened onto the roof of the porch. The man lay unconscious beneath the ladder. Nancy and Ned climbed out to the roof and pulled the ladder off the prostrate form.

"I never saw him before," Nancy said. "Evidently he was trying to get into the house."

"I'll go down and get the guard," Ned offered.

In a few minutes he was back to report that the guard was not in sight.

"That's strange," said Nancy. "Anyway, I think this man should go to the hospital. Ned, will you drive to a phone and call the police to send an ambulance?"

"I hate to leave you alone here, Nancy."

"Oh, I'll be all right," she assured him.

Reluctantly Ned hurried to his car and drove off. Nancy decided to hunt for the guard.

As she neared the hall, she heard a step behind her and turned. The man whom she had thought to be unconscious stood there, an evil grin on his face! Nancy started to run, but he caught her in an iron grasp.

"Let go of me!" she demanded.

He gave a mean laugh. “I got my orders to get rid of you!” the man mumbled. Nancy now realized he had been faking unconsciousness all the time.

“Who gave you the orders? Frank Jemitt?”

“You know too much,” the man answered.

As she struggled to get away, the man pulled a small bottle from his pocket and waved it under her nose. Nancy held her breath, all the while fighting like a tigress. She heard a car drive in. If she could only hold out until help came!

But the room began to reel. Nancy couldn’t breathe. Then she blacked out. When the young sleuth revived, she was lying underneath a bed. Its deep-fringed spread hid her from view.

“I guess that’s why no one found me,” she thought. Her head ached. “I need fresh air.”

Staggering, she made her way to the window. Vaguely she noticed that the ladder was still there.

“Where is everybody?” Nancy wondered. Suddenly she noticed that Ned’s car was not in sight. “Hasn’t he come back yet?”

A sudden fear gripped her. Had the powerful stranger knocked Ned out when he returned, hid him some place, and then taken his car?

Feeling stronger now, Nancy decided to investigate. Going from room to room, she called loudly for Ned, but received no answer. Panic-stricken, Nancy began to search under beds and in closets. Ned was nowhere in sight.

Sitting down on the steps of the front porch, Nancy tried to imagine what had happened during her blackout. “I must think,” she told herself. “This is dreadful! What’ll I do? No phone, no car—”

Her eyes were suddenly attracted to a startling sight. A pair of men’s feet protruded from beneath the porch! Ned’s? Sick with fear, Nancy jumped up, seized the man’s ankles, and pulled him out.

“The guard! He’s been drugged too!”

Almost at once the man’s eyelids flickered open and presently he was able to tell Nancy what had happened. He had been knocked out by the same man who had drugged her.

“I shouldn’t have trusted that guy.”

Nancy told the guard that she was alarmed over the safety of the young man who had come there with her.

"I wish I could help you," the guard said.

Just then a car turned into the driveway and Nancy's heart leaped. It was Ned's! She rushed to meet him.

"Nancy! You're all right! Where did you go?"

"I was under a bed asleep."

"What!"

She told what had happened to her and the guard. Ned was astounded.

"I'm glad you're okay," he said, stepping from the car and putting an arm about her shoulders. "The police and I thought you'd been kidnapped. They're still looking for you."

"And I thought you had been knocked out also. What did happen?" Nancy asked.

Ned explained that soon after he had returned from making the phone call, the ambulance had arrived, only to find that the "patient" had vanished.

"I immediately called the Inlet Village police and they sent three men out here right away. You were well hidden, Nancy. When you didn't answer our calls, we figured that fellow kidnapped you.

"I had to go to headquarters and give a description of you along with his. The police are now combing the highway and turn-offs. Nancy, I came back here just in case—"

Before he could finish, a small truck pulled up in front of the inn. It belonged to the telephone company and in a short time their man had the service restored. At once Ned called police headquarters to brief the captain on the situation. He said efforts would be doubled to find the stranger.

"Tell Miss Drew we haven't picked up any information about the Jemitts," the captain said.

When Ned relayed the message, Nancy remarked, "I have a hunch the Jemitts sent that stranger who knocked me and the guard out. If we could find him, he might lead us to them."

"But not tonight." Ned was firm about Nancy returning home.

"On one condition," she answered. "That you stay to dinner."

"Agreed."

Nancy telephoned her father and suggested another guard be sent

out to relieve the one who had been drugged.

"I'll attend to it at once, Nancy."

"There's a lot more to tell you, Dad, but let's wait until dinnertime. By the way, when will I be able to go into the tower room? I'm sure the answer to many secrets is right there."

"You may go in tomorrow afternoon," the lawyer replied. "Men from the courthouse and an appraiser will be there in the morning. The door to the tower is to be kept locked even after the appraisal is completed. But I'll give you my key."

"Great. Ned and I are coming home now. See you later."

Nancy explained to the guard that he would be relieved in a short time, adding, "Will you be all right if we go now?"

"Oh yes. I have a slight headache but otherwise I feel okay."

When Nancy and Ned were about halfway home, he looked at the gasoline gauge and said, "I couldn't make it to River Heights without filling up. Is there a station near here?"

"Yes," she replied. "Take the next road to the right to Maywood."

Ned drove there. As the tank was being filled, Nancy glanced at a car headed for Maywood. Her pulse quickened. The driver was the man who had drugged her and the guard!

"Hurry!" she called to the attendant. As Ned looked at her, puzzled, Nancy whispered, "I just saw the man who knocked me out. We must follow him!"

Ned called out to the attendant, "That'll be enough." The surprised man shut off the pump.

Ned glanced at the price gauge and quickly paid for the gasoline. "Keep the change," he said.

"Where'd the man go?" Ned asked Nancy.

"Toward Maywood. Oh, please hurry. He ought to be arrested, and besides, he may be going to meet the Jemitts."

The suspect was not driving fast and Ned soon caught up. "Now what do we do?" he asked.

"See where he goes and then get a policeman."

Presently the man turned into an old area of Maywood where the houses were in a shabby state. He parked in front of one on which hung a sign: *Mrs. Dilberry's Guest House.* The man let himself in with a

key.

"Ned, go for the police, will you? I'll wait here in case he or the Jemitts come out."

"Promise me," he said, cupping Nancy's chin in his hand, "that you won't disappear again."

"Not even to chase them?"

"No." Ned sat still until she gave her word, then hurried off. Nancy got out and stood back of a tall hedge so she could not be seen from the windows of the guest house.

It was not long before Ned returned with two plainclothes detectives who he introduced as Manton and Wright. Manton said he would cover the rear door of the house while the others went inside.

A woman in her sixties answered their ring. Detective Wright showed his badge and asked if she was Mrs. Dilberry. When she replied Yes, he said, "You have a guest here who is wanted for assault."

"Not here," Mrs. Dilberry declared. "All my folks are respectable."

"If you don't cooperate," he said, "you will be liable for aiding and abetting a criminal. He just came in here. Where is he?"

"You mean Mr. Krill?" A look of fright had come over Mrs. Dilberry's face. "He's in the room at the head of the stairs."

As Wright and Ned started up the stairway, Nancy paused to ask the woman a question. "Do you have any guests here named Jemitt?"

"I did have but they moved out about an hour ago," Mrs. Dilberry said. "Right after the husband got a phone call."

"Where did they go?" Nancy asked.

"They didn't say, miss."

"Tell me," Nancy went on, "were they friendly with Mr. Krill?"

"Oh my, yes! I could hear them walking back and forth to each other's rooms all the time."

"Thank you," Nancy said, then dashed up the steps to confront the suspect.

CHAPTER XVII

A Capture

AT first Krill refused to open the door. But when Wright said he had witnesses to identify him as the person who had been at The Sign of the Twisted Candles that afternoon, and there was no sense in breaking down the door, the suspect unlocked it.

"You got nothin' on me," he declared.

Nancy stepped forward. "I accuse you of drugging me and the guard, and of being in league with the Jemitts to steal from the Sidney mansion."

Krill's jaw dropped. "H-how did you know that? I was a nut to tie up with them."

The detective said, "You'd better tell us all you know."

"I ain't sayin' another word!" Krill shouted.

"Okay, come along. Miss Drew, will you tell Manton to meet us at the car?"

Nancy went downstairs ahead of the men and relayed the message. Manton joined the others at the curb.

"Please follow us," Wright requested Nancy and Ned. "Miss Drew, you will have to prefer charges against this man downtown."

They drove to police headquarters. Nancy signed the necessary papers and Krill was taken to a cell. Finally she and Ned set off for River Heights.

Ned suddenly burst into laughter. "One thing that makes you so interesting, Nancy, is that I never know when I ask you to go out, what mystery will come our way!"

Nancy chuckled. "And I never know myself. Now if I could only get hold of the Jemitts that easily—"

"I'm betting on you," Ned replied. Then, putting a hand over hers, he added, "But please be careful. They're dangerous."

It was late by the time the couple reached Nancy's house. Mr. Drew was already there and declared he was "hungry as a bear," but wanted

full details on his daughter's afternoon activities.

"First we're going to eat," Hannah Gruen declared, "or the roast beef will be ruined. And no harrowing tales until the dinner is over. We want our guests to enjoy their dinner."

Mr. Drew shrugged and smiled, but obeyed the instructions. Nancy said, "Carol, I can't wait to see your Butterfly Pie." When it was served, everyone gave gasps of delight and Nancy exclaimed, "Why, Carol, it's a work of art!"

Into each portion of the lemon chiffon pie Carol had stuck two large wafers which she had fashioned into the shape of butterfly wings. Carol had decorated them in various patterns with vegetable colorings.

"Nancy's right," said Mr. Drew, "and the pie tastes even better than it looks." Carol blushed and smiled appreciatively.

After dinner the Drews and their friends gathered in the living room, and the full story was told with special emphasis on the finding of the antique swords and the arrest of Krill. In order not to alarm Carol, Nancy's encounter with Krill was dealt with lightly.

But Carol was serious. "It's marvelous what you're all doing for me, but you mustn't take such risks. *Please."*

Presently Ned stood up and said he must leave. "I have to get up early tomorrow and drive to Emerson. Football practice starts early this year."

After he had left, Nancy asked her father at what time the next day she might visit the Sidney mansion. The lawyer replied, "I'll be leaving at seven in the morning to open the house for the men who will be appraising it. Why don't you and Carol have a leisurely breakfast and then drive out? When we've finished our inventory, you can do some more treasure hunting."

Nancy's eyes twinkled. "Oh, that would be great, Dad! I'll ask Carol. She's out in the kitchen helping Hannah."

When Carol heard the request, her lower lip began to tremble. "Oh, do I have to go?" she said, tears coming to her eyes. "I—I—Nancy, that place haunts me. At first, I didn't seem to mind so much. But now it's so pleasant here, and the inn is so full of horrible memories. When Mr. Sidney went, every bit of happiness left that old house."

Nancy put an arm about the girl. "I'm sure I'd feel the same way, Carol, and Dad will certainly understand."

She returned to her father, who agreed to Carol's request.

Nancy said to him, “What do you think of my asking Bess and George? After all, they are beneficiaries.”

Her father smiled. “Do you think the feud has calmed down enough?”

“I’m willing to take the chance,” Nancy replied.

She went to the telephone and asked Bess. “Oh!” her friend exclaimed, evidently shocked by the proposal.

Nancy went on, “After all the *known* possessions of Mr. Asa Sidney are listed, and the valuable ones removed to the bank, Dad said I might hunt for further hidden treasures. It would be fun to have you there and, after all, it was Mr. Sidney’s request that you and George help hunt. You might find something yourself! What do you say?”

“You’ve persuaded me,” said Bess, “but I’ll have to ask my parents.”

Bess was gone from the telephone so long Nancy concluded the answer would be No, or there would be some counterpròposal. She was relieved when the answer was, “It’s okay. And my parents said to tell you they’re glad we’ve made up.”

“I’ll stop for you at nine-thirty,” Nancy said. “Dad is driving out earlier.”

Then she called George. Mr. and Mrs. Fayne had to be consulted but willingly gave their permission. George said, “I hope we find a million dollars!”

On the way to the mansion the next day, Nancy brought the cousins up to date on what had happened since she had last seen them.

“Nancy, how ghastly!” Bess exclaimed.

George scowled. “I hope I’m around if that man Jemitt shows up. I’d like to help capture him.”

When the girls arrived at the inn, Mr. Drew was busy with two men. They were Mr. Harris, a representative of the government, and Mr. Thompson, an appraiser. As soon as they had made an inventory of the furnishings, Mr. Drew asked Nancy to show them the swords, the music box, and the diamond bracelet. Then just before the three men left with these treasures, Mr. Drew gave Nancy the key to the tower room.

By this time it was one o’clock. Bess announced she was hungry. When and where were they going to eat?

“Right here,” Nancy replied. “Carol packed a lunch for us. I’ll get it out of the car.”

While they were enjoying roast beef sandwiches, Nancy told her friends that the Fernwood Orphanage was planning to find new foster parents for Carol.

“She’s darling,” said Bess. “I wouldn’t mind having her live with us.”

As the last of the lunch was finished, George said, “Where do we start our search?”

“Let’s go to the tower first,” Nancy suggested.

They mounted the stairs, and Nancy unlocked the door. The tower room seemed stuffy, so she opened the big front window, then locked the entrance door.

Bess, gazing around, said, “What is it about this room that seems so different from the night we were here?”

“The twisted candles,” Nancy replied. “They’re not lighted.”

George agreed. “Some of them are standing in such odd places. I wonder if that’s significant of anything.”

The three girls began picking them up one by one. Nancy chose two handsome, stately twisted candles in silver holders which stood on one end of the brick fireplace.

“I believe these pieces,” she said, “are covering something valuable.”

Nancy placed a rush-bottomed chair before the yawning opening of the fireplace, and stepped up. Carefully she moved the heavy candles away, then ran her fingers over the shelf.

Was she imagining it or had a brick moved? At once Nancy set to work prying out the loose brick. It was a tedious job but presently she lifted out the brick. Beneath lay a tightly rolled brown suede bag bound with a leather thong.

“Girls, look!” she exclaimed.

She quickly stepped off the chair and laid the bag on it.

“What can it be?” Bess asked.

“I don’t know, but it’s heavy,” Nancy answered as she untied the fastening and spread out the long, narrow bag.

Revealed were tiny pockets containing a collection of old coins!

“Oh!” George cried. “They’re probably worth a mint!”

“Here’s a secret compartment!” Nancy cried out

For safekeeping Nancy replaced the bag, the brick, and the candles. Then she went to examine the opposite end of the shelf. It contained a similar bag but this one held jewelry.

"I can't believe it!" Bess exclaimed. "Nancy, you've earned part of this treasure."

The young detective waved aside the suggestion and said, "I'm hoping to find a secret that's more valuable than old coins or jewelry."

Nancy walked slowly toward the massive, carved desk-table next to the front window. On it was the biggest twisted candle of all. The towering object stood next to a well-worn old leather Bible that Nancy reverently moved to one side. Within the exposed, dust-free area she detected hairline cracks that marked an oblong about a foot wide and fourteen inches in length.

"Here's a secret compartment!" she cried out, and her friends rushed to her side.

Nancy's fingers searched for a spring which might release the lid. At length they found a slight indentation on the underside of the kneehole.

She pushed it and the top of the secret compartment flew open, revealing a recess about six inches deep. Nancy peered inside at an orderly pile of letters. The top envelope said, *For Carol Wipple. To be opened* ... Nancy tried to remain calm about her startling discovery.

"I think I'd better not disturb these," she told her friends, firmly shutting the lid and pushing the Bible back over it. She wanted to discuss the discovery with her father before revealing what she had seen.

Before the girls could continue the search, there was a loud pounding on the door.

"Who is it?" Nancy asked.

"The guard. Miss Drew, there's a phone call for you. The woman on the other end of the line is frantic."

Nancy unlocked the door and the girls hurried out. She relocked it, and dashed down the stairs.

Hannah Gruen was calling. "Oh, Nancy, my news is terriblel" she exclaimed. "Carol has been kidnapped!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Valuable Clue

"KIDNAPPED!" Nancy fairly shrieked. "Oh no! When? How?"

"I don't know." Hannah Gruen's voice was shaky. "Please come right home. I phoned your father's office, but Miss Hanson said he's in court and can't be disturbed."

"I'll come as fast as I can get there," Nancy promised.

When she relayed the message to Bess and George, they were horrified and dashed out to the car with her. All the way to the Drew home Bess kept murmuring, "Poor Carol," and George said, "I'm sure those awful Jemitts did it and will hold her for ransom."

Nancy remained silent. Conflicting ideas raced through her mind. She tried to convince herself that Carol had left of her own accord and would either telephone or return soon.

When Nancy reached the house, this bright thought was dashed. Hannah Gruen was pacing the floor.

"I went to the store for a short time and left Carol here," the housekeeper explained. "She promised to keep the doors and windows locked and to let no one in. Oh, what shall we do?"

George suggested notifying the police, but Nancy said, "Let's wait until my father comes. He should be home soon. Hannah, why are you so sure Carol was kidnapped?"

"Because the laundryman came here right after I got home. When I told him what I suspected, he said he'd seen a car pull out of our driveway with a young girl in it just as he arrived."

"Who was with her?"

"A couple. From the man's description, I suppose it was the Jemitts. Where do you think they took her?"

"I wish I knew," Nancy replied, terribly worried herself.

She decided to take George's advice and call Police Chief McGinnis. He was alarmed at the turn of events.

"So far no police have found any trace of the Jemitts," he said. "It's

possible they're in hiding somewhere. In any case, if there's no word by tomorrow, I'll notify the FBI. In the meantime there may be a ransom note. Nancy, I think I should warn you about getting into the same predicament yourself. After all, the Jemitts no doubt consider you their most formidable enemy."

"One thing puzzles me," Nancy said. "The Jemitts were remembered in the will. Why are they acting like this?"

"Probably to coerce your friend into signing a paper promising them a large portion of her inheritance for taking care of her. They may even get her signature on a letter begging the Fernwood Orphanage to let the Jemitts remain as her foster parents."

"She'll never do it," Nancy told the chief.

"Under a threat she may."

Nancy was not convinced, but Hannah, Bess, and George were. The cousins felt that their parents should know what had happened and telephoned them. The Faynes and Marvins promised to help all they could and then came to pick up their daughters.

Mr. Drew arrived soon afterward and was as disturbed as the others by the kidnapping. He notified the orphanage of Carol's disappearance and of their suspicions. None of them ate much dinner, each lost in thought.

Finally Nancy said, "Dad, what are visiting hours at the jails?"

"They're not all the same, dear. Why?"

"I'd like to talk to Krill. Maybe I can get him to reveal where the Jemitts are hiding."

"Not a bad idea," the lawyer said. "If nothing breaks by tomorrow morning, I'll go with you to Maywood."

Although no telephone messages or callers came during the night, Hannah and the Drews slept poorly and they were up early. Mr. Drew telephoned the jail and found that in his case an exception would be made to the rule of afternoon visitors only. He and his daughter could come at ten.

As Nancy was about to go for her car, the telephone rang and she rushed to answer it. An unfamiliar voice, speaking with a foreign accent, said, "Is this Nancy Drew?"

"Yes."

"I call to warn you not try find Carol Wipple or both of you be harmed." The stranger hung up.

Hannah had been standing close enough to hear the message. She turned to Mr. Drew. “Please don’t let Nancy out of your sight. Someone has just threatened her!”

“I shan’t,” he said.

The Drews rode quickly to the Maywood jail and were taken to Krill’s cell.

The prisoner was defiant. “I said I ain’t talk-in’,” he greeted them.

“To the police perhaps, but how about just to us?” Mr. Drew suggested.

“Huh! And have you blab it to them? No, sir.” Krill turned his back on the callers.

Nancy was convinced this man could not be wheedled into giving information about the Jemitts. She used another method.

“Mr. Krill, there’s been a kidnapping and you’re involved,” she said.

The prisoner did an about-face and yelled, “I am not! I told Frank I wouldn’t have any part of it!” Suddenly he stared at Nancy “Who was kidnapped? You were supposed to be the one!”

Mr. Drew spoke up. “Things will go a lot easier with you, Krill, if you tell everything you know.”

The prisoner walked up and down nervously. “I needed money. Frank Jemitt said he knew an easy way to get it and that would square him with me. I’d done him a big favor. In return he’d pay me well to get Nancy Drew off the case and try to find some papers hidden in the tower room by the man who died.

“He told me where the ladder was. When you drove in, Miss Drew, I thought up the scheme to fool and drug you. But I couldn’t take you along with me because your boy friend was around. I knew Jemitt would be mad because he told me to bring you to—”

“Yes?” Nancy said.

Krill walked back and forth several times before replying. At last he said, “I may as well tell you. The Jemitts own a little cottage along a branch of the Muskoka River. I don’t know exactly where it is, but they said it was sort of in a woods at the end of a road called something like ‘student.’ They call the cottage Restview, I think.”

Just then a guard came to say, “Time’s up, Mr. Drew.”

Nancy was thrilled by what they had learned. “Dad, can you go there with me right away?” she asked as soon as they were outside.

"I wouldn't miss the chance." He smiled.

Looking for a road with a name like "student" that ran to a branch of the Muskoka proved to be frustrating. After two hours of fruitless searching Nancy and her father stopped for lunch at a roadside restaurant. They discussed where to go next.

Presently they became aware of a woman at the next table who seemed to be interested in their conversation. Finally she leaned over and said, "Perhaps I can be of some help. Do you think the road you're looking for could be Steuben? There is such a road about a mile from here. It leads directly to the water."

"Oh, thank you," said Nancy. "We'll try it."

To the Drews' delight, Steuben Road led directly to Restview Cottage. There were no other houses around. No car was in sight and the place appeared to be deserted.

"I guess the Jemitts aren't using this," Mr. Drew remarked.

"But they may have left Carol here," Nancy said. "We must find out."

She and her father stepped from their car and knocked on the door. There was no answer and not a sound inside or outside the cottage.

"Carol may be tied and gagged," Nancy said. "We *must* make sure she isn't in there."

"I agree." Mr. Drew was grim.

They walked around the building and began looking in the windows. No one was in sight. Suddenly Nancy grabbed her father's arm and pointed into the living room.

"See those boxes along the wall? They're just like the ones Frank Jemitt was taking out of the tenant house at Asa Sidney's. And they're marked like the cartons I saw in the warehouse yard. I'm sure they contain stolen property!"

"You're probably right," the lawyer agreed. "We have no right to break in, of course. I guess we'd better—"

He stopped speaking as they heard a car coming. Nancy and her father braced themselves. Were they going to come face to face with the Jemitts and perhaps Carol?

In a few seconds they saw the approaching sedan was not that of the Jemitts, but a police car. The driver was a state trooper, who said he was on a routine checkup of all roads in the vicinity.

“You’re just the man we need,” Mr. Drew told him and showed his business card. “This is my daughter Nancy.”

“I’ve heard of you both,” the trooper said. “My name’s Hatch. What can I do for you?”

“Tell him, Nancy.”

After hearing the story, Trooper Hatch said, “We mustn’t lose any time. I’ll force a window and we’ll go in.”

The three climbed into the living room. First they looked for Carol and called her name several times. She was not there. Nancy was disappointed. Now the search would have to be continued. But where?

“Let’s examine these boxes,” Mr. Drew suggested.

Nancy and the two men began to untie them. She had chosen a heavy cardboard box with many perforations in the top. Nancy knelt on one knee, pulled off the lid, then shrieked in terror!

CHAPTER XIX

A Risky Climb

THE box contained a large copper-colored snake! Disturbed, it reared and the head darted toward Nancy, fangs out.

In horror she fell backward and scrambled out of the way. The snake wriggled to the floor. By this time Mr. Drew and the trooper had picked up iron fireplace tools and quickly killed the reptile.

"Oh, thank you," said Nancy. As Trooper Hatch dragged the snake outside, Nancy recovered from her fright and went to look in its box. A velvet cloth was spread across the bottom of it. Nancy whipped it off, wondering if she would find more snakes beneath. Instead, she saw a large quantity of flat silverware on which the initial S was engraved.

"Asa Sidney's silver!" Nancy exclaimed, and told the trooper about the thefts and her father's responsibility for the silver as executor of the estate.

Trooper Hatch nodded understandingly. "We'll look for anything else marked S, and whatever other objects you recognize, we'll take to headquarters."

More flatware and an initialed silver coffee service were found, but nothing else that could be definitely identified as Asa Sidney's property.

"Do you think," Nancy asked the trooper, "that the Jemitts will come here?"

"If they're sure nobody knows about the place, I believe they will." He grinned. "I'll have this property staked out."

Nancy and her father led the way from Steuben Road. "Do you suppose," she asked him, "that Carol knew about Restview Cottage but didn't mention it?"

"I doubt that she ever heard about it or she would have told you," the lawyer replied. "The Jemitts may have used the place as a temporary drop for their stolen goods."

Despite the progress that had been made in solving the mystery of

the thefts, Nancy reflected sadly that Carol had not been found. "There's not one single clue," she said to herself.

When they reached River Heights, Nancy told her father she would like to stop at his office and make a few telephone calls. First she got in touch with Hannah, who had no news to report. Next, Nancy called the Fernwood Orphanage but they had heard nothing.

Then she tried Police Chief McGinnis. There was still no clue to Carol, or her foster parents' whereabouts, he told her.

Nancy said, "I have one good thing to tell you, Chief." She gave a detailed account of the trips to Maywood and Restview Cottage.

Chief McGinnis chuckled. "You're certainly on the job, Nancy."

After she hung up the phone, Nancy asked her father for his report from the two guards. Both had called in to say no one had come to the tenant house and the only visitor to the inn had been Jacob Sidney. "He was not admitted."

"I wonder what he wanted," Nancy said to her father, then added quickly, "Guess Ned's warning wasn't enough to keep Jacob from the Sidney mansion."

That evening Mr. Hill came to dinner. Directly afterward, Nancy said to him and her father, "I have a new idea where the Jemitts may be hiding Carol."

"Where?"

"At The Sign of the Twisted Candles."

The men were amazed at this deduction. "But with a guard there constantly, how could three of them get in without being seen?" Mr. Hill objected.

"Mr. Jemitt is clever," Nancy answered. "He probably used a key to one of the doors while the guard was patrolling the other side of the house. Dad, won't you and Mr. Hill go out there with me?"

Mr. Drew smiled. "Everything else has failed. I suppose we may as well try this."

The three set off with dire warnings from Hannah Gruen. As they reached the driveway leading to the inn, Nancy suggested that she and her companions walk the rest of the way and go cautiously.

"Good idea," her father agreed.

He locked the car and they set off on foot. Not a word was spoken. The three walked as noiselessly as possible, but were puzzled as to

why the watchman did not come to see who was approaching.

Nancy thought, “If the Jemitts *are* here, maybe they knocked him out!”

The Drews and Mr. Hill circled the house, but did not see the watchman. “I don’t like this,” Nancy’s father said. “But let’s walk around once more.”

As the two men started off, Nancy did not follow. She was contemplating the front of the building. Her eyes swept up and down the sprawling contours, then stopped at the window of the tower room.

“Is that a light?” she suddenly asked herself.

The window seemed to show a lesser degree of darkness than the blank panes elsewhere in the house. Nancy looked more sharply.

“I believe the window has been covered so a light won’t shine through,” she said to herself. “That certainly looks like a crack of light at the bottom.”

Nancy started for the front door but realized that her father had the key. She could not afford to lose a moment in investigating the tower room. But how would she get in?

Suddenly the young detective remembered the ladder on the porch roof, where Krill had played his trick on her. Perhaps it was still there!

Flanking the porch steps on either side were stout lattices. Nancy reached through the vines and gripped the sturdy wooden support. Her toes found a foothold, and she was soon stepping over the edge of the porch roof.

Yes, there was the ladder! It was slow work to handle the ladder without making a sound, but Nancy managed to rest the top rung just below the sill of the tower window.

She carefully mounted the rungs. The ladder gave a sickening lurch as she came close to the top. Nancy reached up and clung to the sill.

She did not dare look downward for fear of losing her balance. With most of her weight supported by her hands Nancy continued her climb. Two steps more, and she was able to put her forearm on the sill and curl her fingers around the iron peg that once had held shutters. Cautiously Nancy raised her head until both eyes were on a level with the window frame.

Nancy could hear the low rumble of a masculine voice! Frank Jemitt’s!

Taking infinite pains to retain her balance, she thrust her fingers

under the edge of the window. Nancy was rewarded as the sash moved upward half an inch, an inch, and yet another half inch. Then the frame gave a tiny squeak and seemed to stick. For one breathless moment Nancy ducked her head and waited to see if anyone came to the window to investigate.

To her relief, the voice droned on without interruption. Nancy again dared to raise her eyes to the level of the sill. The cloth had evidently been fastened to the inner frame, not to the sash, because the gap she had made by raising the window was still covered.

Although Nancy could not see inside the tower room, she could hear plainly what Frank Jemitt was saying:

"—you and that Drew girl spent a lot of time up here. I'm sure you know where the papers I want are hidden. Don't sniffle. Where are they?"

No answer.

Jemitt went on, "And there are hidden treasures in this room. If you'll tell us where the stuff is, you'll get your share. If you don't, then you got to be hurt until you do."

"I've told you I don't know," a weepy-voiced girl answered. *Carol!*

The relief Nancy felt at having located her friend was instantly dispelled by Jemitt's next threat.

"I'll give you one minute more to tell, and then you'll get a taste of this whip!"

Mrs. Jemitt added her own threat. "What's more, if you won't tell us, we'll get Nancy Drew as easy as we got you. We'll set a trap for her because we'll make you phone her to come to see you secretly. Then you can watch us force her to tell!"

"Oh, please don't," Carol begged. "I'll do anything for you, but don't harm Nancy."

"Time's up!" Mrs. Jemitt said.

Nancy, shaken with horror, lifted the cloth that hung over the window. She peered in on a strange drama.

Carol, her new dress rumpled and her hair in disarray, stood leaning against the old desk-table with the secret drawer, not three feet from Nancy. Her face was turned in profile as she stared at Frank Jemitt. His wife stood with arms folded, an evil smile on her face, while he slowly rolled up his sleeves. Then he picked up a thick willow reed.

"Open the closet, Emma," he said. "We'll stick this girl in there

when we're through with her."

Mrs. Jemitt turned toward a door in the wall.

Nancy had less than a minute to act! While the attention of the couple was momentarily diverted, she reached through the opening and tapped on the desk.

"Carol!" she whispered.

At the voice coming out of nowhere Carol's overwrought nerves snapped. She screamed loudly and toppled to the floor.

"What's going on?" Jemitt cried.

He wheeled and saw the fluttering cloth at the window. With a snarl he rushed forward, his hands thrust out. Nancy was sure he meant to topple the ladder on which she swayed.

CHAPTER XX

Startling Confession

AT that moment a muffled scream reached the ears of Nancy's father and Mr. Hill.

"What was that? It came from upstairs in the house!" Mr. Drew exclaimed. "Quick! Inside!"

He unlocked the front door and the two men rushed in. Snapping on lights as they went, the two ran to the second floor.

"No one here," said Mr. Drew. He led the way to the tower room, two steps at a time. The door to it was closed but not locked. An intruder had evidently opened it! Mr. Drew burst in, followed by the banker.

An amazing and uncanny scene met their gaze. Nancy Drew's head and shoulders were framed in the window as if she were standing on air. Frank Jemitt's arms were thrust through the opening, in the act of pushing Nancy backward. The young detective's hands were clutching the man's wrists to prevent her from falling.

Carol's arms were clasped around Jemitt's waist, straining to pull him away from Nancy. And Mrs. Jemitt was just in the act of bringing down the heavy willow reed across Carol's shoulders!

"Stop!" thundered Carson Drew, leaping forward.

With one sweep of his arm he sent Mrs. Jemitt reeling aside. Raymond Hill grabbed her husband, while Mr. Drew reached out the window to rescue Nancy. He was not a moment too soon, for the ladder on which she was standing slipped from under her and crashed to the ground.

Mr. Drew helped Nancy through the window, while Carol guarded the door toward which her foster mother had dashed.

"Let me go!" Jemitt croaked. He was being half choked by Mr. Hill's grasp.

The banker released his prisoner, who staggered into a corner, clutching at his throat.

"Nancy, are you all right?" her father asked.

"Yes, Dad, but you came just in the nick of time."

"Oh, Nancy," Carol cried out, "you were almost hurt because of me! It was my scream that gave you away."

"But it was what warned us," Mr. Drew told her. "Raymond, please go down to the phone booth and call State Police headquarters. Ask them to send troopers to take charge of two prisoners."

As Mr. Hill went off, Nancy turned to Jemitt. "Where's the watchman?"

"See if you can find out," was the surly reply.

"I can answer that," Carol spoke up. "My foster father punched him. While the man was kind of groggy, Mr. Jemitt tied his arms and legs and gagged him. He's in the big closet under the stairs on the first floor."

"I'll get him," Nancy volunteered. "Come on, Carol."

The guard, shamefaced at having been trapped a second time, eagerly took charge of the two prisoners. While waiting for the State Police car to arrive, the Jemitts made a full confession. Many of Nancy's hunches had been correct. Jemitt also said he had put the snake in the box to frighten off any burglars.

By this time the police had arrived and the Jemitts were in custody.

After they had gone, Mr. Hill asked, "Now what do we do? Shall we call it a night?"

Nancy answered quickly, "No, let's not. I want to phone all the beneficiaries of Asa Sidney's estate and ask them to come here at once."

The others turned questioning eyes toward Nancy. She went on, "During my search in the tower room I came across a hidden letter from Mr. Sidney marked 'For Carol Wipple. To be opened in the presence of Peter Boonton, Jacob Sidney, Anna and Bess Marvin, and Louise and George Fayne.' I think it will explain why he left most of his money to you, Carol."

"Oh!" the girl exclaimed.

"Do you mind if they come?" Nancy asked.

Carol sighed. "We may as well get it over with."

Nancy went to the telephone. In turn each one she called was glad to hear that Carol had been found and was shocked to learn of the Jemitts' cruelty. The relatives demurred, however, about coming to

the inn at that late hour, but finally consented.

"Carol, when did you last eat?" Nancy asked when she rejoined the others.

"Not for a long time. I lost my appetite."

"Then let's have a bite before the Sidneys and Boontons begin to arrive."

Carol managed a smile. "I guess I'll need some strength. Nancy, I let the Jemitts into your house and they threatened me, and made me come here. How can you ever forgive me?"

Nancy smiled. "You're already forgiven. Now let's look for some food."

The kitchen cupboards had little in them but Nancy found canned chocolate milk, potted ham, and some relatively fresh bread. She made a sandwich and heated the milk. Carol had just finished eating when the Marvins arrived. Within a few minutes all the relatives had assembled.

"Miss Drew, your reason for getting me out here this late," said Jacob Sidney, "had better be good."

"I'm sure it will be," Nancy replied. "Will you all please come up to the tower room."

Carol grabbed Nancy's hand as they ascended the steps. She was trembling.

"Don't be afraid," Nancy whispered. "I have a hunch there's a wonderful surprise for you in the letter."

Mr. Drew unlocked the door to the tower room and the many candles were lighted. When everyone was seated, the lawyer briefly outlined what had happened since they had last been together, told of the recovered treasures, and the Jemitts' part in stealing some of Asa Sidney's property.

"And now Nancy will show you where she found the letter to Carol," he concluded.

A great hush came over the room as his daughter walked to the desk-table. She pushed the big Bible aside and pressed the secret spring. As the lid of the hidden compartment flew up, the onlookers gasped.

"There are many papers in here," Nancy said, "but the letter on top is the one to be read now."

She gave it to Carol, but the overwrought girl's hand shook so hard she dropped the envelope.

"Nancy, please read it for me," she begged.

There was a pause as Nancy picked up the letter. Again she gave Carol a chance to read it, but the other girl only shook her head. *"Please."*

"All right." Nancy opened the letter and began to read.

" 'My dear Carol,

" 'This letter is the confession of a stubborn, selfish old man. For many years I have known the secret of your identity, but have not revealed it for two reasons: the feud in my family and the fact that I wanted to keep you near me. I have no direct descendants, but you are my great-grandniece.' "

At that revelation there were exclamations of surprise in the room and whisperings among the Boontons and Sidneys. Carol kept her head down, eyes closed. Her face was pale, and she sat perfectly still.

Mr. Drew said, "Go on, Nancy."

" 'There were only two people who ignored the senseless feud and for this reason were ostracized from their families. They were John Boonton, brother of Anna Marvin and Louise Fayne, and Helen Sidney, daughter of Jacob Sidney. When their families would not let them marry, they eloped, and later had a baby whom they named Carol after my little girl who died. That baby is you, Carol, my dear!' "

Suddenly Bess Marvin rushed to Carol. "You're my cousin!" she exclaimed, hugging the speechless girl.

George ran forward. "And you're a Boonton! You're Carol Boonton!"

Tears of joy streamed down Carol's cheeks. She smiled through them and looked at Nancy. "Oh, Nancy, if it hadn't been for you, I might never have known this!"

Nancy hugged her new friend while Mrs. Marvin said, "I shall ask the Fernwood Orphanage to appoint us as foster parents."

Mrs. Fayne said, "I want to share in this."

Mr. Drew had risen and asked for silence. "There is more to the letter. Nancy, please finish it."

Everyone sat down again and she went on.

" 'You will wonder how I learned all this. I was a director of the Fernwood Orphanage at the time you were brought there, Carol, by

the rector of a nearby church. You were about two years old. He had found you near the altar, crying. A search for your parents proved hopeless.

" 'You were such a dear little thing and reminded me so much of my own little girl I asked that the orphanage change the name they had given you to Carol. The whole thing haunted me and I began some private detective work. I found out that a little while prior to the rector finding you, there had been an automobile accident not far away. The couple in it were killed. They proved to be Mr. and Mrs. John Boonton.

" 'A further search by me revealed that they were relatives of my wife, and among some papers they had left at a boarding house was a picture of you, Carol. Just as I was wondering what to do about revealing this secret, the Jemitts offered to become your foster parents. At a Board of Directors' meeting I said I would give my consent only if the Jemitts came to work here.

" 'You know the rest, Carol, and forgive me for being so selfish. I hope the fortune I am leaving you will more than offset any pain and privation I have caused you. I love you very much, Carol.

Asa Sidney' "

When Nancy stopped, all of Carol's relatives hurried to her side. Jacob Sidney put an arm around his new-found relative. "So I'm your grandfather, eh? Well, I must say that makes me very proud. Carol, please, don't hold what I've said against me, and I don't want one penny of your inheritance."

"Nor I," added Peter Boonton. He managed an apologetic grin. "After all I'm your great-uncle!"

Carol found it hard to say anything, but finally she whispered, "I can't believe it. Suddenly I have a grandfather, a great-uncle, two lovely aunts, and two wonderful cousins. And—and a most marvelous friend."

Her eyes searched the room for Nancy, who had disappeared. Mr. Drew had left too. But in a few minutes both came back, saying they had been on the telephone.

"My dad has an announcement to make," she said, her eyes dancing.

The lawyer addressed the group. "We called the Fernwood Orphanage. Fortunately the Board of Directors was having a late-evening meeting. They agreed that since relatives of Carol's have been found who want her to make her home with them, the orphanage will

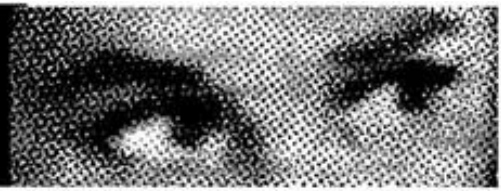
waive any further claim."

A friendly argument between the Marvins and the Faynes followed. Both families wanted Carol to live with them. During the discussion, Nancy was wondering what her next mystery would be. It was a puzzling one, which was called Password *to Larkspur Lane.*

"We've decided, Nancy," Bess announced, "that Carol's going to spend most of her time at boarding school, and divide the rest between the Marvins and the Faynes."

"And I recommend that Carol learn judo," George said with a grin, "so if those horrible Jemitts should ever break jail, she'll know how to handle them!"

Everyone laughed and a thrill went through Nancy. The Boonton-Sidney feud was over!



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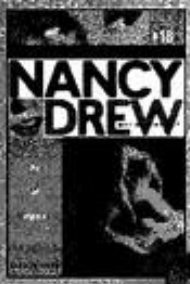

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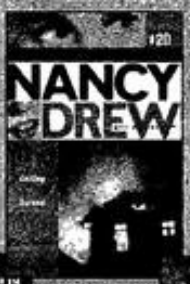

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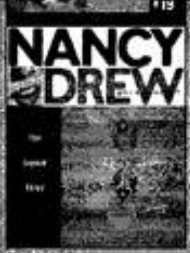

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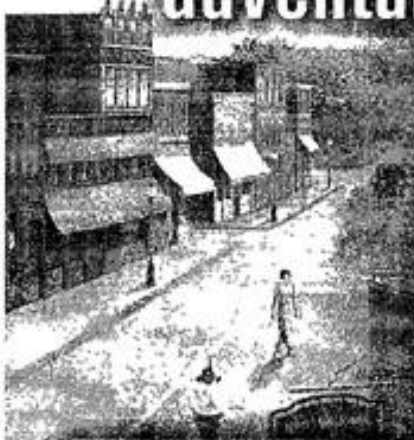

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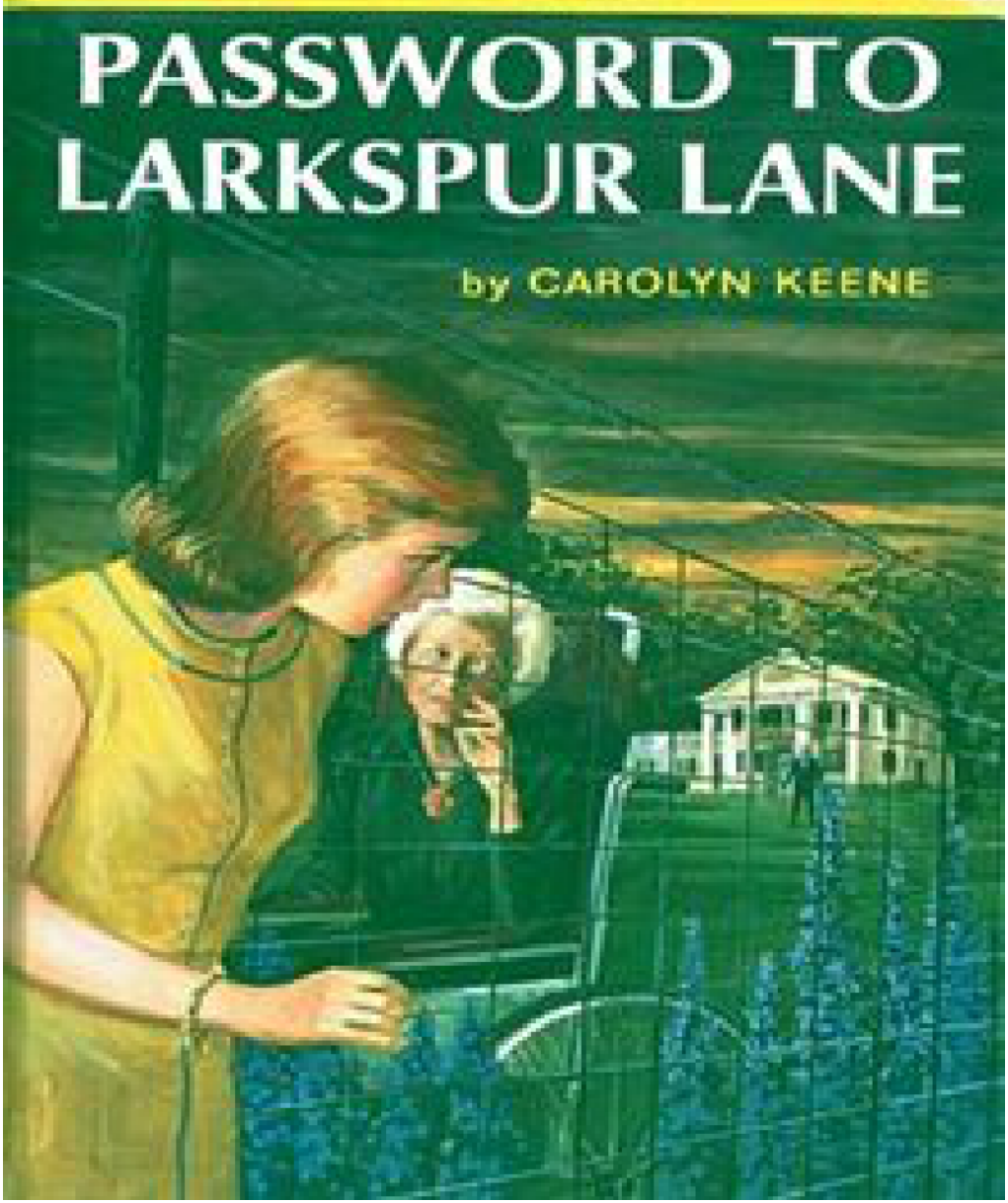
by CAROLYN KEENE



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PASSWORD TO LARKSPUR LANE

Blue bells will be singing horses! This strange message, attached to the leg of a wounded homing pigeon, involves Nancy Drew in a dangerous mission. Somewhere an elderly woman is being held prisoner in a mansion. Nancy is determined to find and free Mrs. Eldridge.

While working on the case, the young detective's close friend, Helen Archer, begs her to solve a weird mystery. Helen's grandparents, the Cornings, are frightened by a sinister wheel of blue fire that appears after dark in the woods outside their home at lonely Sylvan Lake. When Nancy discovers the significance of the eerie signal, she also learns that her two mysteries are connected.

How the clever young detective fathoms the meaning of the strange message, how she locates the stronghold of a ruthless ring of swindlers, and how she rescues the gang's victims makes absorbing and exciting reading.

*"**There's that spooky blue flame again!**" Mr. Corning gasped*

NANCY DREW MYSTERY STORIES®

Password to Larkspur Lane

BY CAROLYN KEENE

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CHAPTER I

Singing Horses

"IF this were two thousand years ago—!"

Nancy Drew paused on the flagstone path of her garden in front of a border of beautiful larkspur. For a moment the attractive titian-haired girl of eighteen watched the tall blue plumes waving in the breeze. Then she turned to the middle-aged woman behind her.

"I must select the very best for the flower show, Hannah," she said.

The Drews' housekeeper and Nancy paused to look up at a passing airplane. They were startled to hear its engines cut out. As Nancy and Hannah watched in alarm, a wounded bird plummeted down and landed among the flowers.

"A homing pigeon!" Nancy exclaimed, seeing the tiny metal tube attached to its leg. "Maybe the bird's carrying a message!"

Hannah Gruen's eyes were on the plane. "Oh, Nancy!" she gasped. "It's going to crash!"

Nancy gazed upward and saw that the twin-engine craft was flying very low. The plane was tan color and had a curious design outlined in black on the fuselage.

"It looks like a winged horse," Nancy thought, but she could not be sure, since the sun was shining in her eyes.

Suddenly the coughing engines roared to life and the plane nosed upward, then zoomed away.

"Whew!" Hannah exclaimed. "I thought that thing was going to fall right onto our house!"

"I wonder if the plane hit this pigeon," Nancy said, and once more turned her attention to the bird, which was panting feebly.

"You poor dear!" she said, picking it up. Gently Nancy felt for broken bones, but found none. "The pigeon may only be stunned," she said.

"What a miracle that it's alive!" Hannah said.

Nancy nodded. "I'd better see if the pigeon's carrying a message. It

might be something important that we ought to report to the bird's owner."

While the housekeeper held the pigeon, Nancy removed the top of the capsule on its leg and slid out a thin piece of paper. She unrolled the message and read aloud:

> *" 'Trouble here. After five o'clock blue bells will be singing horses. Come tonight.' "*

Nancy and Hannah looked at each other in puzzlement. "It's a strange message," the housekeeper said. "What in the world does that mean?"

"I wish I knew," Nancy replied, "but it sounds urgent—and mysterious." She slipped the message into her pocket. "I'll wire the International Federation of American Homing Pigeon Fanciers and give them the number stamped on the bird's leg ring. All homing pigeons are registered by number so the owners can be traced."

She examined the ring containing the digits 2-21-12-12, then hurried off to phone the telegraph office. By the time she returned, Hannah had placed the bird in a cardboard box lined with cotton.

Nancy brought an eyedropper and with it gave the pigeon water. Then she put some wild-bird seed in the box. "Do get well," she said softly.

"How are pigeons trained to carry messages?" Hannah asked as Nancy placed the box on a garage shelf.

"They have a home loft. No matter where the birds are released, they always fly back there."

"Did you ever hear how fast they can fly?"

"I read about some pigeons who raced from Mexico City to New York, averaging a mile a minute." Nancy glanced at her watch. "I'd better hurry or I won't get to the flower show on time."

She continued snipping prize larkspurs and putting them in a basket.

"Before all the excitement began," said Hannah, "you were saying, 'If this were two thousand years ago—,' but you didn't finish. What did you mean?"

Nancy smiled. "I was thinking that if I had lived two thousand years ago I might have been a Grecian maiden. And in that case, I might be praying right now in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. I always imagine flowers around there. Maybe delphinium—that's another name for

larkspur."

"What would you be asking for?" said Hannah.

"That my father's olive groves would bear extra well, that his vines would be loaded with grapes and his nets heavy with fish every morning."

Hannah laughed heartily at the thought of her employer, Carson Drew, the well-known lawyer, picking olives or hauling in a fish-filled net.

While talking, Nancy and Hannah had been cutting stalks with the finest flowers and before long had a basketful. Nancy took it into the kitchen and carefully fashioned an exquisite arrangement in an old English vase. She carried it to her convertible parked in the circular driveway.

She thought, "My car was a good-looking one until that horrid man ran into it last week." Ruefully she surveyed the dent.

"It's a strange message, Nancy," the housekeeper said

"Good luck with your entry," Mrs. Gruen said. "Hope it wins a prize!"

“Hannah, you’re a darling!” Nancy exclaimed and kissed her. The two had deep affection for each other. The girl’s mother had died when Nancy was very young and the housekeeper had helped Mr. Drew bring up his only child.

As Nancy drove across the town of River Heights, she mulled over the strange message on the homing pigeon. Was it a code? Suddenly it occurred to Nancy that the pigeon might have been released from the plane which accidentally struck it. She wondered what the reply would be from the Homing Pigeon Fanciers association.

“Maybe,”’ she thought excitedly, “I’ve stumbled upon a new mystery!”

By this time she had reached the Blenheim estate on the outskirts of River Heights. The broad tree-shadowed lawn was filled with women setting up displays for the annual charity flower show. Nancy had been assigned a spot in the greenhouse behind the mansion.

As she set her larkspur arrangement in place, the chairman came up to her. “My, Nancy, your delphinium are gorgeous,” Mrs. Winsor said.

“Thank you,” Nancy replied.

“I just adore larkspur,” the woman said. “Such a lovely old-fashioned flower. My grandmother had them in her garden. She always had hollyhocks and bluebells, too.”

Bluebells! Nancy’s mind leaped to the mysterious message. Could the *blue bells* in it mean flowers?

Aloud she said, “Mrs. Winsor, I hope the judges like my flowers as much as you do!”

Nancy hurried back to the convertible. She was eager to get home and see if a reply to her telegram had come.

To make better time, Nancy turned off the main highway onto a little-traveled shortcut. As she drove down the narrow road, Nancy saw an old black sedan parked along one side.

The dusty leaves of some sprawling bushes lay across the top of the automobile and hung down over the windshield and other windows. It was impossible to see inside.

“That’s really an old-timer,” Nancy thought, and wondered if anyone were in it.

After she had passed the car, her eyes shifted to the rear-view mirror. Slowing up, she studied the license plate, which was so mud-splattered that only four digits showed: 2-21-1.

Nancy's interest quickened at once. These were the first four numbers on the pigeon's leg band! Was there a connection?

She gave the license plate another fleeting glance and noted by the color that it was from out of state, but she could not see the identifying initials.

A moment later an oncoming car passed her. The driver raised a hand and called, "Hello, Nancy!"

"Dr. Spire!" she exclaimed.

The famous bone specialist, a friend of the Drew family, was often called out on local emergencies. Glancing back again, Nancy was surprised to see Dr. Spire pull up in back of the old sedan.

Wondering if she could be of help, Nancy stopped at the side of the road and watched as the physician walked toward the parked car carrying his black bag. As he reached the sedan, a rear door swung open. Dr. Spire put one foot inside and leaned forward. With a sudden movement he vanished into the car and it roared away.

"That was strange!" Nancy said aloud. "It seemed as if someone jerked him into the back seat. He may have been kidnapped!"

On a hunch, Nancy backed her convertible to the physician's car, then braked and leaped out. Dr. Spire had locked his car and the keys were gone.

"I guess he expected to be met," Nancy told herself. "He probably jumped into the old sedan. But the whole thing is peculiar."

When Nancy reached home, Mrs. Gruen opened the front door. "It's here. Came a few minutes ago." She handed over a telegram.

Nancy tore open the envelope. The wire was from the Pigeon Fanciers association. It read:

> LOCAL REPRESENTATIVE WILL CALL. BIRD NOT REGISTERED. SUSPECT TROUBLE. KEEP MESSAGE SECRET.

CHAPTER II

A Golden Clue

"ANOTHER strange message!" remarked Hannah Gruen. "What do you think now, Nancy?"

"That a real mystery has dropped into my lap." Nancy grinned. "And about time! I've been longing for one ever since I solved *The Sign of the Twisted Candles.* I can't wait to tell Dad about this!"

Carson Drew had always been close to his daughter, and often discussed his cases with her, because she grasped the issues so clearly and quickly.

Nancy reread the telegram and said to Mrs. Gruen, "The pigeon isn't registered. That's so its messages can't be traced to the sender."

Hannah replied, "Well, it takes all kinds of folks to make a world. What's more, pigeons, planes and telegrams aren't getting tonight's dinner ready. We're having hot biscuits and chicken, one of your father's favorites."

"And mine," said Nancy.

"Mr. Drew likes sweet pickles too," Hannah added. "I'll go down to the cellar and get a jar."

Nancy's thoughts returned to the odd message which had been attached to the pigeon's leg. She took the note from her pocket and studied it again. The words were neatly printed in black ink.

For safekeeping, Nancy slipped the note and the telegram into her purse, and set it on the hall table. At that moment she heard a thumping noise and a cry from the cellar.

"Hannah!" she called. There was no answer.

Nancy dashed to the kitchen and looked down the cellar stairs. A huddled figure lay on the floor.

"Oh!" Nancy exclaimed and ran down the steps.

The housekeeper managed to sit up. "I slipped," she said shakily. "Oh, my back!"

"Hannah!" Nancy exclaimed anxiously. "Are you badly hurt?"

"No," the housekeeper replied. "I can get up, I'm sure. Just give me a hand."

Nancy put one arm around Hannah and helped the woman to her feet. Mrs. Gruen stood still a few moments to catch her breath, then said:

"I guess I didn't break anything, thank goodness. But I'm afraid I've strained my back."

"I'll drive you to Dr. Spire's," Nancy said, "and let him examine you." With the girl's help, the housekeeper slowly climbed the stairs.

"I have to get dinner," Hannah announced.

"That can wait," Nancy said firmly. "We'll leave a note telling Dad where we've gone."

As they drove toward the doctor's residence and office, Nancy hoped that he was back from his mysterious call. When they reached the house, Mrs. Spire told them her husband was out.

"Is he still on that case out near the Blenheim estate?" Nancy asked. "I passed him on my way home from the flower show."

"Yes, he is, but he should be home soon." She and Nancy helped Hannah to a couch in the office. Then Mrs. Spire excused herself to get dinner, and asked Nancy to answer the office phone if it should ring. Twenty minutes later it buzzed.

Nancy lifted the receiver, but before she could say "Hello," a muffled voice asked if Dr. Spire had returned. When Nancy said No, the caller directed her to write down a message.

As she wrote, a strange expression crossed her face. At the end of the message, the speaker abruptly hung up.

"Can I believe my eyes?" Nancy wondered as she looked at the message she had jotted down.

> *"If you say blue bells, you will get into trouble, for they are no longer used here."*

"Blue bells again!" Nancy told herself. Was Dr. Spire somehow involved in the mystery of the message attached to the pigeon's leg? Could it be more than coincidence that the numbers on the license plate of the black sedan matched the first four digits on the bird's leg band? Her suspicion that the doctor had been pulled forcibly into the sedan came flooding back.

Nancy was about to tell Hannah what the anonymous caller had said, when brisk footsteps were heard outside the door. Dr. Spire, a

lanky, balding man, strode into the office. Although he looked worried, his thin, intense face lighted with a smile.

"Well, Nancy, we meet again!"

Hiding her surprise and relief at seeing him safe, Nancy replied with a cheerful greeting.

The physician turned to Hannah. "Mrs. Gruen, my wife has told me of your accident. I'm sorry to hear about it. I'll take a look at you now."

Fifteen minutes later the doctor announced that she had a sprained back. "Rest in bed a few days. I'll write a prescription for you. In ten days you'll be feeling like your old self."

"I'll see that she rests," Nancy promised.

She helped Hannah to the car and settled her comfortably in the front seat. Then she excused herself and hurried back inside. The doctor was seated at his desk, gazing into space. He looked at Nancy inquiringly.

"I jotted down this phone message for you," she said. "It is important that I ask you something about it."

The doctor's lips tightened as he read the message.

"Does it make sense to you?" Nancy asked.

"Yes," he said grimly.

Dr. Spire stood up and strode across the room. Then he turned and faced Nancy. "I need help in solving a strange mystery. There's nobody with whom I'd rather discuss it than you and your father. Will you help me?"

"Of course," Nancy replied.

"Then will you both come back later?"

Nancy agreed. "I'm eager to hear your story. I think the mystery may be linked to one I'm working on."

The doctor looked amazed, but before he could ask what she meant, Mrs. Spire came to tell him that dinner was ready. Nancy quickly excused herself.

When she and Hannah reached home, Carson Drew, a tall, distinguished-looking man, was eagerly waiting for them. He was sorry to hear what had happened to the housekeeper and helped her upstairs. After Mrs. Gruen was settled in bed, Nancy brought her a tray of food, then prepared dinner for her father and herself.

While they ate, Nancy told him about the strange occurrences. Mr. Drew shook his head and chuckled. “You attract mystery like nectar in a flower attracts a bee, Nancy.”

She grinned. “In this case, I’ll be the blossom and hope the villain will come my way!”

“I’ll go with you tonight,” he agreed, “and I’ll do anything I can to help.”

With a twinkle in her eyes Nancy said, “Then you can start clearing the table. I’ll scrape the dishes and put them in the washer.”

Carson Drew laughed. “You caught me that time, young lady!”

But he was Nancy’s willing helper and it did not take the father-daughter team long to tidy the kitchen. Then they set off for Dr. Spire’s office. He greeted them cordially and indicated deep leather armchairs.

Mr. Drew said quietly, “Suppose you tell us what’s worrying you, Richard.”

“It’s a strange story,” the physician said. “I almost can’t believe it myself. This afternoon I had a phone call saying that a patient of mine, Mrs. Manning Smith, had been in a minor car accident on Hollow Hill Road. She wanted me to meet her there and if necessary take her to the hospital.

“The caller—a man—told me to look for an old black sedan. Since I know Mrs. Smith has one, I thought nothing of it. After passing you on the road, Nancy, I spotted the car, parked, and went up to it. The back door swung open. As I leaned forward to look inside, my shoulders were seized and I was yanked to the floor. Before I could move, a hood was dropped over my head and a man on each side held me firmly.”

“How far did you ride?” Nancy asked.

“A long time—about an hour. Not a word was spoken during the trip.”

“Where did they take you?” Mr. Drew asked.

“I don’t know. But some of the roads were bumpy. I think we were out in the country. When the hood was finally removed I found myself in what appeared to be a regular hospital room.”

“Was there a patient?” Nancy asked eagerly.

“Yes, but not Mrs. Smith. Someone explained a clerk had made a mistake. I didn’t learn the patient’s name. She was an elderly woman,

suffering from a dislocated shoulder. There was just one other person in the room—a nurse. She was a large, hard-faced woman and warned me not to talk to the patient."

"Did you try?" Mr. Drew queried.

"No, but all the time I was working, it seemed as if she wanted to tell me something. Her eyes kept flashing signals which I could not understand. Then, while I was taking her pulse, the nurse turned for a moment and the woman slipped this into my hand."

Dr. Spire reached into his pocket and held out a thin, gold-chain bracelet with a small gold shield dangling from it.

"How dainty!" Nancy exclaimed as she took the bracelet to examine it. Set into the bangle was a garnet.

"There's an inscription over the jewel," she said. " 'To my darling Mary from Joe.' " Nancy turned the shield over. "On the other side is a coat of arms. Perhaps we could trace it and find out the woman's name. If she's being held against her will, we ought to rescue her!"

"It's worth a try," her father agreed.

"Keep the bracelet, Nancy," the doctor said, "and see what you can learn about it." Then he continued his story. "When I finished, two men came in and replaced the hood. Then I was driven back to my car. A couple of times when I tried to resist, they got rough."

"How dreadful!" Nancy burst out. "Dr. Spire, do you think the woman was able to talk, but had been ordered not to?"

"Yes, I do."

"Did you see or hear anything that would help us find the place?"

Dr. Spire smiled. "I learned the password to the place."

"Marvelous!" said Nancy. "What was it?"

He replied, "As we turned into a driveway—I could tell by the creak of gates—the driver said 'Bluebells' and someone answered 'Pass.' "

Nancy's eyes sparkled with excitement. "This is where my story comes in, Dr. Spire." Quickly she told him about the pigeon, the plane, and the telegram. "Whoever is holding the woman prisoner must have been afraid you had heard the password. So he decided to change it."

"Yes, that would have been just about five o'clock, as the pigeon message said," the physician agreed. "The phone call here was to warn me not to try finding the place again or using the password to get in if I did."

Carson Drew spoke up. “Richard, you must report this to the police.”

Just then the telephone rang. When the physician finished the call, he said, “Emergency at the hospital. I’ll have to go. Carson, will you and Nancy report the incident to the police for me?”

“We’ll stop at headquarters,” the lawyer replied.

As the Drews left the house, Nancy noticed a shadowy figure across the street. “Are we being watched?” the young sleuth wondered.

While driving downtown Nancy noted a pair of headlights reflected in her mirror. One was dimmer than the other. The uneven lights stayed close behind all the way to police headquarters. Nancy slowed down in front of the building, and the car, a sleek black sedan, went past.

“No place to park here, Dad,” she said. “Suppose you hop out and start telling your story. I’ll join you as soon as I find a parking space.”

Mr. Drew got out, and a few minutes later Nancy pulled into the far side of a parking lot at the corner. When she stepped out of the car, a hulking figure emerged from the nearby shadows.

A feeling of apprehension swept over Nancy, and she tried to dart past the man. But a powerful hand seized her arm and jerked her back.

“Not so fast!” the stranger growled in a deep voice.

CHAPTER III

A Chase

"LET me go or I'll scream!" Nancy cried out.

Instantly the man released her arm, but he swiftly stepped in front of her. "Wait a minute," he commanded. "You want to help your father, don't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Nancy said warily. She studied the husky, broad-shouldered man. He had heavy brows, deep-set eyes, and a cruel mouth.

"You're Nancy Drew, aren't you?"

Nancy hesitated, afraid he might be trying to find her father to harm him. "Are you sure you're talking to the right person?" she asked.

"Okay," the man said bitterly, "play it smart. It's been years since I saw Drew and maybe I'm wrong. But I could be right, so you take a message."

Nancy did not reply, and the stranger went on, "Tell Carson Drew to mind his own business or he's in for a bad shock."

"If you're through," Nancy said coldly, "I'll go now."

The man stepped aside and she hurried from the parking lot, her heart pounding. As she reached the sidewalk Nancy came face to face with two friends.

"Why, Nancy Drew!" exclaimed Jean Moss. "I haven't seen you in weeks!" Her escort, Bill Wright, added, "Been solving any mysteries lately?"

Nancy's heart sank. Had the man in the parking lot heard them? She managed to talk pleasantly with the couple for a few minutes but she was worried.

As Jean and Bill moved off, Nancy heard a soft laugh from the shadows. A moment later a deep voice said mockingly, "Good night, Miss Drew." The speaker melted into the darkness.

Biting her lip in vexation, Nancy ran to police headquarters. The

officer on duty directed her to the Detective Bureau. Here Mr. Drew was conferring with Lieutenant Mulligan, a red-faced, brawny man with thinning hair. He knew the Drews only by reputation.

Once again Nancy told her story. The detective jotted down the partial license number of the suspicious car.

When Nancy handed him the bracelet, he said, “Hmm. Has an inscription, but it’s old. Mary and Joe could have been dead for years. No last name or dates, either. Afraid it won’t be much use to us.”

“If you don’t mind,” Nancy said, “I’d like to see if I can trace the owner.”

“Go ahead,” the lieutenant said and gave it back. “We’ll check out the car’s license number, but probably the kidnappers are using phony plates.”

As Nancy and her father walked to the parking lot, she told him about the stranger who had accosted her there and the warning message.

Mr. Drew frowned. “I don’t know who he could be. Some crank, I suppose.”

Cars were closely parked on either side of Nancy’s convertible, so she gave her full attention to pulling out of the tight space. Soon after she had driven into the street and turned toward home, headlights appeared in her mirror. The right one was dim!

“Dad, the same car that followed us before is behind us,” Nancy said tensely. “I’m afraid the driver’s the man who wants to harm you! Let’s try to shake him.”

Keeping within the speed limit, Nancy drove into the residential section of the city, taking every cutoff and winding street she knew. Meanwhile Mr. Drew watched the car behind, which continued to follow.

“It seems useless to try getting away,” he said finally. “I’d like to get a good look at the driver.”

“All right,” Nancy replied.

She increased her speed, widening the distance between the two cars, until she approached an intersection where there was a bright overhead light. She swung around, her tires squealing on the asphalt, and stopped short, facing her pursuer.

When he came abreast of them, Carson Drew gasped. “Trail him!” the lawyer ordered as the driver zoomed off.

Nancy turned again and pursued the sedan. Just as she was about to overtake it, the traffic light ahead turned red. The driver rode straight through, rounded a corner, and disappeared.

Nancy sighed. “We’ll never find him now.”

“Never mind,” said Mr. Drew. “It was a good try. Let’s go home.”

“Who was that man, Dad?” Nancy asked.

“Adam Thorne, an escaped convict. Thank goodness he didn’t hurt you.”

Nancy shuddered. “What was he jailed for?”

“Thorne was given ten years for embezzling the assets of an estate. While in jail he became very bitter and at times violent.”

“But what’s his interest in you?” Nancy queried.

Mr. Drew explained that Thorne had been a River Heights attorney. “He was disbarred prior to his trial and I was in charge of gathering the evidence against him.”

“I see,” said Nancy. “Dad, I have a hunch Adam Thorne is involved in the bluebell mystery. He must have been spying outside Dr. Spire’s house and recognized you. Probably he’s not only looking for revenge, but wants to keep us from working on the case.”

“I’m afraid you’re right. For Pete’s sake be careful, Nancy.”

“You too, Dad.”

A few minutes later the Drews reached home. While Nancy checked on Hannah, who was asleep, Mr. Drew called Lieutenant Mulligan and reported his daughter’s encounter with Adam Thorne and the resultant, unsuccessful chase.

“If Thorne’s tied in with Dr. Spire’s kidnapping,” said Mulligan, “he’ll stop at nothing. I’ll broadcast a bulletin immediately.”

The next morning Nancy was up early and went to talk to Hannah Gruen.

“I have good news for you,” the housekeeper said. “My niece Effie has offered to come here and work while I’m laid up.”

“Good. Effie’s fun.”

“And scatterbrained sometimes,” Hannah remarked.

After breakfast Nancy drove off to get Effie Schneider. When she rang the bell of the small frame cottage, the door was opened by Effie’s mother.

“Hello, Mrs. Schneider,” said Nancy. “How are you?”

“Fine, thanks. Please come in. Effie isn’t dressed yet. She’s been reading a movie magazine instead of putting on her clothes.... Effie!” she called.

“Here I am, Mom,” a high-pitched voice replied. “Hi, Nancy!” said the girl as she walked into the living room munching a banana.

“Hello, Effie,” Nancy greeted the thin, seventeen-year-old girl.

Effie had light-blond hair, which she wore close-cropped with feathery bangs over her forehead. She was dressed in a Chinese-style pink kimono, with high-heeled satin mules.

“This outfit is like the one Ling Su wore in the movie, ‘The Chinese Wall Mystery,’ ” Effie remarked, making an Oriental bow.

Nancy grinned, but Mrs. Schneider said tartly, “Hurry up and put on street clothes, Effie.” As her daughter went off, Mrs. Schneider turned to Nancy. “Once Effie stops mooning about movie stars and singers, she’s really a good worker and a dandy cook.”

Nancy had her doubts about this, but later was agreeably surprised when Effie prepared a delicious luncheon of chicken salad, hot rolls, and iced tea. She would not let Nancy help her.

“Aunt Hannah told me you’re working on a mystery,” Effie said. “That’s exciting. You keep your mind on the case. I’ll do the work around the house. I once read a mystery about a circus girl who was shot out of a cannon and disappeared. It took three detectives a whole month to find her. Bet you can’t guess where.”

Nancy grinned. “Inside the cannon?”

“Oh gee, how’d you know?” Effie said. “You must have read the story.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Bewildered, Effie shook her head and walked off. After eating lunch, Nancy decided to start tracing the owner of the bracelet. Half an hour later she walked into Butler and Stone’s jewelry store and asked for Mr. Stone, who was a personal friend.

“Well, Nancy, what can I do for you?” the jeweler asked cordially. “Are you interested in a diamond-studded detective badge today?” he teased.

Nancy laughed. “Do you sell them?” she countered.

“Oh sure. To the police,” the jeweler replied with a grin.

Nancy took the bracelet from her purse. “Mr. Stone, could you trace this coat of arms?”

The jeweler held the bracelet toward the window to get a better look at the heraldic design on the shield. As he did, Nancy noticed a large woman in a pink butterfly print dress looking through the plate-glass window

“Just a moment,” Nancy said quickly to Mr. Stone. “Is there some other place—”

The jeweler understood at once. “Another mystery?” he asked.

When Nancy nodded, he motioned to a private office at the back of the store. Once again Mr. Stone examined the bracelet. “This was made in Victorian times,” he announced. “I doubt if it was designed around here. Hmm, an attractive coat of arms. Three mullets dexter and a Maltese cross sinister; crest, a falcon’s head embattled, with the motto *‘Esse quam videre.’*

“Every authentic coat of arms is a matter of record,” Mr. Stone explained. “It will take time, but we will be able to trace the family, if not the individual owner. May I keep the bracelet temporarily?”

Nancy hesitated. “It doesn’t belong to me,” she said. “Could you make a copy of the crest?”

“Certainly. Please take a seat.” Mr. Stone excused himself and went out. In fifteen minutes he returned, gave the bracelet to Nancy, and said he would send the tracing to Mr. Abelard de Gotha, an expert on coats of arms.

“Thank you. I’ll stop by in a couple of days to see if you’ve heard about it,” Nancy said.

As the young detective left the store her thoughts turned to the sick woman who had given the bracelet to Dr. Spire.

“I wonder who she is, poor thing.”

At the corner Nancy waited with a group of people for the light to change. As the walk signal came on, someone pushed roughly past her and darted out into the street. Nancy recognized the pink butterfly print dress and at the same moment realized that her arm felt strangely light.

“My handbag!” Nancy gasped. “It’s gone!”

The woman was hurrying ahead of the crowd. Nancy was sure she had stolen the bag and sprinted after her.

“Stop!” Nancy shouted, but the woman broke into a run.

Nancy put on a spurt of speed and caught up to her on the far sidewalk. “Give me back my—”

The big woman whirled and gave Nancy a powerful push that sent her reeling. She fell backward off the curb!

CHAPTER IV

Frightened Grandparents

SEVERAL quick-acting pedestrians caught Nancy just before she hit the pavement.

"Are you hurt?" exclaimed a middle-aged woman as she helped the girl to her feet. "I saw that awful woman push you. Were you trying to catch her?"

Nancy took a deep breath and said, "Yes. She stole my purse," then added, "I'm all right. Thanks so much."

Suddenly Nancy spotted the thief hurrying into Brent's Department Store down the street. She dashed after her and hastened through the revolving doors.

Looking around quickly, Nancy saw a flash of pink near the bank of elevators. By the time she reached them, the woman had gone up in one of the cars.

Nancy darted to the nearby escalator and rushed up, two steps at a time. On the second floor she sped to the elevators but saw by the indicator light that the car she wanted had already left. The woman was not in sight.

"What luck!" Nancy murmured, darting back to the escalator.

A few moments later she arrived breathless on the third floor. As Nancy looked toward the elevator, the door was starting to close. No one was inside. The woman she was after must have stepped off here!

"May I help you?" asked a salesgirl. "We have some lovely—"

"No, no!" Nancy panted. "I'm after a thief! A woman in a pink print dress. Did you see her get off the elevator?"

The girl's eyes grew wide. "A thief!" she exclaimed. "Why, yes, I did see her, but I don't know where she went. What did she take?"

"My purse," said Nancy.

"I'll get my supervisor," said the salesgirl.

Nancy glanced around the third floor, where many customers were examining racks of dresses. Where could the woman be hiding?

“Dressing rooms,” Nancy decided. She saw that the Fall Clothes Department had fewer customers than the others. “I’ll start there.”

She hastened across the floor and peered through an archway into a narrow aisle. There was a row of curtained cubicles along one wall.

Quietly Nancy peeked into the first room. Empty! In the next a stout woman was struggling into a tight dress. She did not see Nancy. Quickly the young detective moved along the row of dressing rooms. In the fifth room she found the thief!

The woman was leaning against the wall, panting. Nancy’s open handbag lay on a shelf beside her and in one hand the woman clutched the gold-chain bracelet.

“I’ll take that!” Nancy said, stepping into the cubicle.

The woman froze in amazement for a moment, then swiftly seized the handbag and hurled it at Nancy. As the girl ducked, the contents scattered and the woman tried to dash past. Nancy seized her wrist and caught hold of the bracelet.

“Help! Thief!” she shouted.

Instantly the woman let go of the gold chain, broke free, and raced into the corridor, with Nancy at her heels. The thief darted through the arch, but as Nancy reached it, two saleswomen arrived, blocking the way.

“What happened?” one asked.

“That woman in pink!” Nancy exclaimed. “I must stop her!” She darted around the salesladies and ran toward the elevators.

Too late! She saw the thief board a car just before the door closed.

How to stop her? Suddenly Nancy spotted a store telephone behind a nearby counter. She hurried to it and picked up the receiver.

“Operator, this is an emergency! Ring the phone nearest the entrance on Main Street, please!”

In a second a voice said, “Silverware!”

“Listen carefully,” Nancy said tersely. “A large woman in a pink print dress will probably come rushing toward you any minute now, heading for the door. Stop her! She’s a thief!”

“Just a moment,” said the clerk. There was a pause, then the speaker said, “The woman you described passed my counter as we were talking. I ran after her, but she hopped into a taxi and it sped off. Shall I notify the store detective?”

"No, thanks," said Nancy. "It's too late."

Disappointed, she hung up, as a voice behind her said, "What's going on?"

Nancy turned around. It was Mr. Mahoney, the store manager. He was surrounded by salesladies. One gave Nancy her handbag with all the contents restored.

"Oh, hello, Nancy," said Mr. Mahoney. "What's this about a thief in the store?"

Nancy took him aside and explained briefly. "I don't think the woman is an ordinary purse snatcher. She's probably mixed up in a case I'm working on."

"Well, I hope you catch her," Mr. Mahoney said. He waved good-by and walked off.

Nancy examined her handbag. The strap had been cut. "I doubt if that woman knew I had the bracelet with me before she saw it through the jeweler's window." The young detective suspected that Adam Thorne had engaged the thief to trail her.

"I believe she recognized the bracelet," Nancy told herself, "and she'll tell Thorne about it. I hope the old lady who owns it doesn't get into trouble for slipping it to Dr. Spire."

Deep in thought as she walked down the street, Nancy did not see a petite, dark-haired young woman hurrying toward her.

"Nancy! What luck to run into you!"

"Helen Corning! Oh, I'm sorry," Nancy said with a grin. "I can't get used to your being Mrs. Archer. How's everything?"

"Oh, just great, except for one thing. Nancy, I was going to call you this very afternoon. How about solving a mystery for me?"

Seeing her friend's look of interest, she chuckled. "I thought that would catch you. Could you come to my apartment tomorrow evening at six? I'll tell you all about it then. Besides, Jim would love to see you."

"I wouldn't miss it," Nancy replied, "but I think it's only fair to tell you I'm already working on a mystery."

Helen smiled. "Then this is just one more. You're so clever, Nancy, I'm sure you can solve both at once!"

Nancy laughed. "Give me a hint."

Helen explained that her Grandmother and Grandfather Corning

had recently moved to Sylvan Lake. “They have a dreamy stone house on a hill. It is beautiful. But now Gram and Gramp are afraid to stay there because of something queer that keeps happening.”

“What is it?” Nancy asked.

Helen glanced at her watch. “I’d love to tell you, but I must run. See you tomorrow. We’ll drive out to the lake and have dinner with Gram and Gramp. Thanks a million, Nancy!”

As Helen Archer hurried away, Nancy stood on the sidewalk musing. “Um—another case.” Then she turned toward home.

When Nancy reached it, Effie opened the front door. “I heard you drive in,” she said in a loud whisper. “The pigeon man’s here.” She gestured toward the living room. “He’s very good-looking.”

“Thank you,” said Nancy, and went to greet the caller, hoping he had not heard Effie.

A tall blond man in his twenties got up as she entered. He introduced himself as Donald Jordan, secretary of the local branch of the Pigeon Fanciers association. He showed her his credentials.

“I’m so glad you came,” said Nancy. “Please sit down. I’ll get the pigeon and the message.”

Nancy hurried to the garage and saw with relief that the bird seemed stronger.

“Oh, I hope Mr. Jordan won’t take you away,” she murmured to the bird. “I want you to get well enough to fly to your home loft. Then I’ll follow you!”

Nancy carried the pigeon to the living room. Mr. Jordan examined the bird gently, noting especially the number on its leg band. Then Nancy took the message from her purse and handed it to him.

“This is the second pigeon seen in this area with an unregistered number,” he said. “The other was found dead on the highway. I mentioned it to a detective friend of mine. He thought criminals might be using this means of communication, thinking it safer than telephone or telegraph or letter.”

Nancy nodded and told him she had reported the incident to the police.

“Good. That saves us the trouble.” The young man arose. “Well, thank you for notifying me, Miss Drew. Now I’ll take the bird and—”

“Oh, please don’t!” Nancy exclaimed.

Mr. Jordan looked surprised. “Surely you don’t want to be bothered with a sick pigeon?”

“I don’t mind,” said Nancy. “I’d like to try to nurse it back to health.”

The young man shook his head. “I’m afraid there’s not much chance, but if that’s what you want, it’s okay with me.”

He made copies of the leg-band number and the strange message, then wished her luck and left. Nancy returned the pigeon to the garage. She immediately went to Hannah Gruen’s room to tell her about the latest developments in the case.

“And about time,” said the housekeeper. “I never hear any news up here.”

“How are you feeling?” Nancy asked.

“Much better. If it wasn’t for that fussy doctor, I’d be up and working like I should.”

Nancy laughed. “You just take it easy while you have the chance!”

Late in the afternoon Mr. Drew called to say that he could not be home until nine o’clock. To keep Hannah company, Nancy and Effie ate supper on trays in her room and afterward watched a television play.

At the end, Effie sniffed in disappointment. “Not enough love,” she commented. “Now that handsome Mr. Kyle should have—”

She stopped speaking as the front doorbell rang. “Dad must have forgotten his key,” Nancy remarked. “I’ll go.”

She hurried down the stairs and started to open the door. Instinct told the young sleuth to be cautious. She flicked the wall switch to turn on the porch light, then opened the door a crack. The porch was dark! Nancy thought the bulb must have burned out.

“Dad?” Nancy called quickly.

There was no answer, but from somewhere in the shadows came the sound of heavy breathing.

CHAPTER V

Blue Fire

"WHO'S there?" Nancy called sharply into the darkness. She heard a stirring near the porch, but could see no one.

"Never mind who," came a rasping whisper from the shadows. "We warned your father to mind his own business. Now we're telling you: forget the doctor's story or you'll be sorry."

Just then headlights swept up the driveway. Instantly a dark figure dashed across the lawn and disappeared into the night.

Nancy recognized her father's car. Moments later Mr. Drew parked beside the house and hurried up the porch steps.

"Is something wrong?" he asked. "Why are you out here?"

"A man rang the bell, Dad, but wouldn't let me see him. He gave us another warning."

The lawyer's face was grim. "Did you recognize his voice?" he asked.

"It sounded something like Adam Thorne's," Nancy replied, "but I can't be sure because he spoke in a whisper. The man was big, though, like Thorne."

Nancy explained why the light was not on, and turned to examine it. "The bulb's gone!" she exclaimed. "I suppose the man took it out so I couldn't see him. I'll put in a new one."

"I'd like to wring that fellow's neck," her father stormed. "I'll put the car away, then report this to Lieutenant Mulligan."

"Dad, before you put the car in the garage, would you drive me to the flower show? I'm just a little bit curious as to who won the prizes."

He grinned. "Of course I'll take you." He patted her shoulder. "While I phone Mulligan, go tell Hannah and Effie where we're going and not to answer the doorbell."

Twenty minutes later father and daughter arrived at the greenhouse on the Blenheim estate. The display was beautiful, but the cut flowers

were beginning to wilt. Nancy's pulse quickened as she approached her own entry.

"Dad!" she cried out. "Look!"

Attached to her bouquet of larkspur was a dark-blue satin ribbon with the inscription FIRST PRIZE!

"Nancy, that's wonderful," her father said. "Congratulations! Maybe you ought to give up solving mysteries and raise flowers."

"Not a chance," she said.

"But it's far less dangerous," he countered. "Take this present mystery, for instance. It might be wise for you to drop it."

Nancy looked shocked. "Why, Dad! Think of the poor old woman who is a prisoner."

"But, Nancy, my first concern is for your safety. You are more important to me than all the mysterious old ladies in the world!"

Nancy's face showed her disappointment. "Oh please, Dad, no."

Mr. Drew looked uncomfortable. "I know, I know. You're like me. You'll never be satisfied until you lick the problem. Go ahead."

"Thank you, Dad," Nancy said happily. "I will."

"Hold it, Miss Drew!" said a voice nearby.

Nancy looked up to see a news photographer pointing a camera at her. "There! Stand right next to your exhibit."

Before she could comply, Nancy heard another voice say, "Go get her!" At the same instant a big, vicious-looking dog sprang at her!

"Oh!" she screamed, dodging just in time. The Great Dane crashed into the vase of prize flowers, knocking the exhibit to the ground and shattering the vase. He yelped in fright, then ran off.

"Who owns that beast?" cried the photographer.

No one claimed to be the owner. The Drews guessed Thorne was behind the attack, but could see him nowhere in the crowd. He—or his henchmen—had taken advantage of the excitement to escape.

Nancy reported the incident to Mrs. Winsor, who told her to take the blue ribbon home. When she and her father reached the house, Hannah and Effie were delighted to hear that Nancy had won first prize in the delphinium class. “Here’s hoping,” said Mrs. Gruen, “that you’ll come out ahead in your mystery, too.”

"You're sweet," Nancy told the housekeeper, then kissed her good night without telling of the dog episode. But she was alarmed over it.

Nancy went to her pretty yellow-and-white bedroom. There she changed into pajamas, robe, and slippers, then seated herself at her desk. She was determined to figure out the strange message which the pigeon had been carrying.

She opened a gardening book and turned to bluebells, then delphinium and larkspur. She learned that bluebells were different from the others. Delphinium were perennial flowers and usually blue, though some were white or lavender. Larkspur, the annual flower of the genus, occurred in pale and dark blue, mauve and other shades. In common usage, however, the names delphinium and larkspur were often interchanged.

"Well, that's interesting," Nancy thought, "but it doesn't get me much further." She closed the book with a sigh and put it away. "Maybe if I just forget the whole thing until morning an answer will come to me."

She stretched out on her comfortable bed and tuned in the clock radio to her favorite musical program. But her mind kept returning to the problem.

"I have larkspur on the brain. Larkspur—larkspur," she mused, clasping her hands behind her head. "Funny name. I wonder how they came to be called that. Maybe because the blossoms have little points

or spurs. But why the lark? Why not sparrowspur or ostrichspur?

"Spurs are for horses, and horses don't look like larks, and larks don't suggest anything that wear spurs. Larks sing and—Oh!" Nancy sat bolt upright. "I have it! I'll bet that's it!"

She raced to her father's study and knocked. Mr. Drew called, "Come in." He looked up from the letter he was writing when Nancy exclaimed:

"Dad! I think I have a clue to the kidnappers' hideout. It's larkspur! *Singing horses* stands for lark—spurs!"

"Nancy, that could be it!"

"Maybe the kidnappers got the idea of using that flower in their code, because it grows at the headquarters of the gang!"

The lawyer nodded thoughtfully as Nancy went on, "There may be bluebells there too, but I'm not sure. *Blue bells* in the pigeon's message might mean something else since it is two words. I'm going to drive through the countryside until I find a place—a house, a street, or something else—that has larkspurs, bluebells, or both as its most conspicuous feature."

"It's certainly a lead worth working on," said her father. "Better than trying to follow the pigeon to its home loft."

In the morning Nancy studied a map of the River Heights area and decided to ride through the countryside east of the town on her search for the telltale flowers. She drove tirelessly, stopping only to ask people if they could direct her to places where either larkspurs or bluebells grew. Here and there she found larkspurs in gardens of private homes too small to be the place Dr. Spire had described. After lunch she drove on, but had no luck. At four o'clock she gave up, disappointed.

"My score is exactly zero," she thought. "Well, tonight I hear about the Corning mystery."

Back home again, Nancy went to Hannah Gruen's room to see how the housekeeper was getting along. "I'm feeling much better," Hannah reported, and told Nancy that her father would not be home for supper.

Nancy showered, put on a pretty lime-green dress with a matching sweater, and left the house. Twenty minutes later she was ringing the bell of Helen's apartment. The door was opened by Helen's handsome husband, Jim Archer.

"Hi, Nancy!" he said, smiling. "We're ready."

“Jim will drive his car out to the lake,” Helen said as she came into the living room. “Leave yours here.”

On the way, Helen asked about Nancy’s two close girl friends, Bess Marvin and her cousin George Fayne. “How are they?”

“They’ve been vacationing in California,” said Nancy, “but they’re coming home tomorrow.” She chuckled. “Won’t they be surprised when I tell them I have two mysteries they can help me solve!”

Helen grinned. “It’s my guess they won’t be a bit surprised!”

Presently Jim turned onto the side road which led to the lake. When they reached it, the setting sun had turned the water to a golden color. A few sailboats, silhouetted against the red sky, were heading toward shore.

“What a lovely scene!” Nancy exclaimed.

The road circled the lake and at one point branched onto a drive which led up the wooded hillside. The Comings’ modern house was nestled among the trees and rocks at the top, overlooking the water. The drive wound around it to a large flagstoned area, surrounded by shrubs. Jim parked the car there.

“The front door is in the back,” Helen said with a laugh as she led the way to it and rang the bell.

The door was opened by a middle-aged houseman with red hair. He wore neat dark trousers and a white jacket.

“Hello, Morgan,” Helen said cheerfully. “How are you?”

“All right, thank you,” he answered, but did not smile. Nancy wondered if he, too, was worried about the strange happenings here.

Mrs. Corning hurried into the hall to greet her guests. She was a pretty woman, with short fluffy white hair, and just as petite as Helen. She took them into the big living room with a huge picture window.

Mr. Corning rose from a chair. He was a tall man with a bold, aristocratic nose. Though he had to use a cane to support his frail-looking body, his dark eyes were alert and usually sparkled with humor. But now, Nancy noted, there was a strained expression on his face.

“What is frightening the Cornings?” Nancy wondered.

She had no hint until after dinner when the group returned to the living room. As the girls seated themselves in deep pumpkin-colored chairs, Mrs. Corning went to the picture window. She began to draw the soft beige draperies, shutting out the dark wooded hillside below

and the few lights of houses on the opposite shore.

"Oh, please leave the curtains open, Gram," said Helen. "Let's watch for the thing tonight. After all, that's what Nancy's here for."

"Thing?" Nancy repeated, leaning forward in her chair. "Please tell me about it."

"Of course," said Mr. Corning. As his wife opened the curtains again, he began, "One night about two weeks ago, my wife and I were sitting here enjoying the view when we saw a large circle of blue fire at the bottom of the hill."

"Blue fire!" Nancy exclaimed.

Mr. Corning nodded. "Yes, it's a circle about as big as a car wheel and glows with an eerie blue fire. It's approximately seven feet off the ground."

"Sounds weird," Helen remarked.

"How long did it last?" Nancy asked.

"About five minutes—then vanished. The next night it came again—this time closer."

"We've seen the thing every night since," put in Mrs. Corning. "It has come nearer each time. Somehow, I feel it is a threat."

"In the meantime," her husband went on, "there have been strange happenings in the house. I want to show you something." He arose unsteadily, then suddenly gasped. Seizing the chair back with one hand, he pointed with his cane out the huge window.

"There's that spooky blue flame again!"

Nancy leaped to her feet. In the darkness of the woods, not far below the house, glowed a large blue fiery circle.

"Helen! Jim!" Nancy exclaimed. "Let's go see what it is!"

"Be careful!" Mrs. Corning urged as the young people dashed from the room. The trio let themselves out the main door.

"Helen and I will go to the right," Nancy whispered. "Jim, you take the left. When we're even with the light, let's close in on it."

As Jim slipped away in the darkness, the girls went quietly down through the woods. The blue circle continued to burn steadily.

"Queer," Nancy murmured. "What is it?"

Unfortunately, Helen slipped on a stone and turned her ankle. Involuntarily she gave a cry of pain. Both girls froze, their hearts

pounding.

For a moment the circle of light did not move. Then, slowly, it began to turn toward them!

CHAPTER VI

Mysterious Morgan

HELEN seized Nancy's arm as the eerie blue circle of fire moved toward them through the woods. Nancy squeezed her friend's hand reassuringly, though she herself was not certain that the ring meant harm to them.

Closer and closer it came. Suddenly Helen could stand the suspense no longer and gave a shrill scream.

Instantly the circle vanished!

Nancy darted to the place it had been, but now nothing was there. She tried to peer through the darkness, but the night seemed blacker than ever.

At the same time, she could hear Jim shouting for Helen and running toward them. "What's the matter?" he panted.

"That weird fire was coming at us," said Helen. "I lost my head and screamed. I'm sorry, Nancy," she added. "It spoiled your chance to find out what the thing was."

"Never mind. I'll see it again, I'm sure."

Back in the house, the Comings met the three with a flood of anxious questions. They had heard Helen scream and were badly shaken. Quietly Nancy explained what had happened.

"I'll ring for Morgan," said Helen's grandmother. "I think we could all do with a cup of tea to settle our nerves." She pushed a button on the low table beside her.

Five minutes later the houseman had not yet appeared. "I'll go for him, Gram," Jim offered, but returned to report that he could not find the servant. "I looked everywhere, including his room."

"Perhaps he went outside to investigate the blue fire," Nancy suggested. "I think we ought to search the woods for him."

"I went out and called," said Jim, "but got no answer."

The elder Comings exchanged worried glances. "Never mind, Gram," said Helen. "I'll make the tea. You tell Nancy the rest of the

story."

"It was two weeks ago," said Mrs. Corning, "that we first saw the circle of fire. And it was exactly two weeks ago that Morgan changed."

"How do you mean?" Nancy asked.

"He used to be such a cheerful fellow," she replied, "always ready with a little joke. Nothing we asked was ever too much trouble. I can't tell you what a tower of strength he has been. Over the years he has become like a member of the family. But now—he's a stranger."

"He forgets things," said Mr. Corning. "Sometimes we ring and he doesn't come. Afterward, he mumbles a flimsy excuse."

"Several times I heard noises at night on the first floor," said Mrs. Corning. "I came down and found Morgan wandering around, fully dressed, with a strange, frightened look on his face. We've asked him a number of times to tell us what's the matter, but he avoids answering."

"How long have you known him?" Nancy asked.

"Fifteen years," replied her host. "He came to us with excellent references. And now I don't know what we would do without him."

"Perhaps he needs medical help," Nancy suggested.

"Maybe he does," said Mrs. Corning, "but I feel sure the reason for his trouble is the blue fire." She arose, went to a modern-looking desk, and returned with an envelope. From it she took a folded card.

"On the morning of the day the fire first appeared," said Mrs. Corning, "a letter came in the mail for Morgan. A little later when I went to the kitchen, he was sitting in a chair, very pale, with his hand on his heart. The open envelope was on the table but the card had dropped to the floor. As I picked it up, I couldn't help noticing it was an ordinary greeting card."

"Did you see a signature?" Nancy asked. Helen's grandmother shook her head.

Mr. Corning explained that they had called a doctor, who said Morgan had suffered a bad shock. But the houseman would answer no questions.

"That afternoon," Mrs. Corning went on, "I called a taxi and went to the little shopping center across the lake. I found a duplicate of the card there. I wanted to get a close look at it." She handed the card to Nancy.

On the front of the card was the picture of an attractive cottage

with the door wide open. Above it were the words “OPEN THE WAY TO FRIENDSHIP.” The inside was blank.

“Did you see any marks on the original?”

“None. It was exactly like this one—just an innocent card.”

“Not so innocent, I’m afraid,” said Nancy. “It had no signature and that makes me think the card was a message from someone Morgan knows and probably fears. Have you reported any of these happenings to the police?”

Mr. Corning sighed. “We discussed doing so, but Morgan begged us not to. I thought he might have another attack if we did. No, Nancy, we’d like to get to the bottom of the matter quietly.”

Helen returned with the tea wagon. As Mrs. Corning poured, she suggested that the young people stay overnight. “To tell the truth, we’d feel better with you here.”

They agreed and Nancy went to call her father. Before retiring, she asked, “Have any of the lake residents seen the blue fire?”

“There is only one other house near ours,” Mr. Corning replied, “but it’s empty. Folks across the lake don’t bother about what goes on here.”

Jim spoke up. “Gram said Morgan often disappears for a while after the blue fire is seen. He probably spots it from his room, which is at the end of the house and faces the lake.”

“I imagine he’s back by now,” said Mrs. Corning. “I’ll check after I show you to your rooms.”

She led the three guests into the hall and up a spiral staircase. Nancy was given a room which had a full view of the lake.

“There are several pairs of new pajamas in the dresser,” Mrs. Corning told her. “Help yourself.”

Nancy waited until her hostess had checked on Morgan. He had not returned! As the young sleuth got ready for bed, she wondered where the mysterious houseman had gone.

In the morning, when she followed Helen and Jim to the dining room, Nancy found Mrs. Corning setting the table while her husband watched, white-faced, from a chair.

Morgan was still missing!

“His bed hasn’t been slept in,” said Helen’s grandmother, “and our car hasn’t been used.”

“He might be lying hurt in the woods,” Nancy suggested. “We’d better search.”

The three young people hurried toward the front door. But as Jim reached to open it, Nancy exclaimed, “Wait!”

Sticking out from under the door was a piece of white paper. She picked up the paper and unfolded it. It contained a message written in pencil. Nancy read it aloud:

“ ‘Don’t worry about me. Have to be away for a while. Don’t call police. Will explain later.’ ” It was signed “Morgan.”

“He must have slipped this under the door late last night,” said Nancy.

The three returned to the dining room and Nancy showed the note to Mrs. Corning. “Yes,” she said, “that is Morgan’s handwriting.”

“Gramp, I think you should call the police,” said Helen.

Her grandfather shook his head. “For the present, we’ll do as Morgan asks.”

“Of course, we can get along without him for a day or two,” said Mrs. Corning, “but I’d feel safer if someone were here at night.”

“I wish I could be here,” said Helen, “but—”

“No, no,” her grandmother said firmly. “Your place is with your husband.”

“Perhaps Nancy could stay,” Helen suggested. “Would you?” she asked her friend.

“I’d love to,” said Nancy, “but you know I am also working on another case.”

Mrs. Corning smiled. “This could be your headquarters for both.” Suddenly she frowned. “But I don’t like to think of you working on this case alone. It might be dangerous.”

“Maybe Bess and George could come,” Helen said eagerly. “You three could have lots of fun here when you’re not working on your mysteries.”

“I’ll see what Dad says,” Nancy promised. “Anyhow, I’ll come back tonight. I’d like another chance to catch whoever is responsible for that ring of blue fire.”

After breakfast she walked down the hill to where she and Helen had seen the strange phenomenon the night before. Here and there she found singed twigs and leaves, but had no time to look for other

clues. Jim was waiting with the car.

When Nancy entered her own house a little later, she found Effie whistling cheerfully in the kitchen. Her hair was topped by a pink bow.

"Oh, hello, Nancy! Your father's gone already, but he said to tell you he'd see you tonight. Your friend Bess called. She and George are back. They want you to phone them right away."

Just then the back doorbell rang. Nancy turned to see a small boy outside the screen.

"Hello, Johnny," she said, walking over to him.

"Hi, Nancy!" he said. "What's in that box in your back yard?"

Effie cut in quickly, "A pigeon. And don't you touch it!" The girl explained to Nancy that she had taken the pigeon's box from the garage and placed it in the yard. I put on a lid with holes in it. Now he can get air and a little sunlight."

"I peeped through a hole," said Johnny, "and I saw something move. Is it a bird? I like birds. My Mommy has a parakeet. Oh, Nancy, can I have some cookies?"

Nancy laughed and gave him the last one in the jar. "That's all."

"It's okay. I'll go play with your bird."

"No, no," Nancy said quickly. "Leave the bird alone. I don't want it to fly away."

The telephone rang and Nancy went to answer it. The caller wanted the library. "I'm sorry," Nancy said, "you have the wrong—"

She broke off as Effie's shrill cry sounded from the kitchen.

"Help, Nancy! The bird is loose!"

With a gasp of alarm, Nancy hung up the phone and dashed for the kitchen. Effie was standing at the back door, wringing her hands. Outside, Johnny was squatting beside the box, holding the lid in his hand. The pigeon was looking over the edge.

"Don't move, Johnny!" Nancy called, and hurried out with Effie behind her.

"He wants to fly," the little boy said. "He flaps his wings like anything. See?"

The bewildered bird hopped to the edge of the box and sat there, balancing and stretching.

“Stay still, Johnny!” Nancy warned. “Don’t frighten it!”

“He isn’t scared of me,” the boy answered confidently. “He likes me. See?”

Johnny’s chubby little hands swooped toward the bird. Alarmed, the pigeon flapped its wings, rose awkwardly into the air, and landed just out of reach on a kitchen window sill.

“Oh dear!” said Nancy hardly daring to breathe. “We must get it down.”

Effie was already dragging a light lawn chair to the window. “I’ll get him for you.”

“Wait! That won’t hold you.”

Before Nancy could stop her, Effie leaped onto the chair seat and reached for the sill. Nancy grabbed for the chair. Too late! It tipped. With a wild cry Effie toppled off, her arms flailing.

The frightened bird flew away!

CHAPTER VII

Unfriendly Keeper

"EIFFIE! Are you hurt?" Nancy cried. But even as she helped the girl to her feet, Nancy's anxious glance went to the bird flying across the yard.

"I'm all right," Effie said breathlessly. "I'm sorry I scared him away. Oh, there he is!"

She pointed to the pigeon who had come to rest on the garage roof. Then, flying slowly and uncertainly, it flapped about in a circle and took off toward the front of the house.

Nancy grabbed Effie's hand. "Come on!" She pulled Effie toward her car, which was parked near the front door. "I'll drive. You watch for the bird. We must follow it!"

Flustered, Effie climbed in beside Nancy, taking off her apron and chattering apologies.

"Don't talk! Just watch," Nancy said crisply.

Effie, clutching her pink bow to keep it in place, gazed skyward. "There he goes!"

The pigeon was flying low along the street in front of the house. Nancy started the motor and began to follow slowly.

"I don't think this will work," Effie said, "because we have to stay on the streets and the pigeon can fly in any direction."

"Maybe you're right," Nancy said grimly, "but we're going to try!"

"He's turning left," Effie announced. Quickly Nancy turned left onto a side street and followed the bird until it veered again.

"Lucky he's flying low and slow," said Effie.

Now and then the bird fluttered to a rest on a roof or tree branch, but the girls managed to track it until they had reached open country beyond the suburbs of River Heights.

"My neck is stiff from watching," Effie said with a sigh. "Where's he going, anyway?"

“Home to its owner,” Nancy replied. “Where is it now?”

“He went that way,” said Effie, pointing across a field, “but I can’t see him because of those trees.”

“Oh, we mustn’t lose it!” Nancy exclaimed. She stopped the car and scanned the sky.

Effie gulped. “I’m sorry. I can’t see him. Oh, I could cry!”

“Well, don’t,” Nancy commanded. “That pigeon is one of my best clues. I must find it!”

Suddenly she spotted the large gray bird flying out of the dump of trees. “There he goes!” Nancy exclaimed.

Luckily the pigeon flew parallel to the road and Nancy drove along behind it.

“Please watch the bird, Effie,” Nancy implored as her companion looked away.

“I’m not even blinking both eyes at once,” Effie assured her. “I blink one eye at a time.” After a mile, Effie suddenly pointed to a grove of elms that towered over the flat fields. “Look! He’s going round and round over those trees. I think he’s dizzy.”

“No,” Nancy said, and felt a quiver of excitement. “That’s where it lives. I see buildings in the grove.” A second later the pigeon disappeared among the trees.

Nancy halted the car beside a stone wall over which honeysuckle tumbled. A short distance ahead was a driveway.

“Listen, Effie,” Nancy said firmly, “we are going in there and you are not to say a word about our keeping the pigeon or following it here.”

Effie’s eyes were wide. “Is there a gang of kidnappers in there?” she asked timidly.

“I don’t know who’s there,” Nancy replied. “But we must be prepared for anything.” Then, seeing that Effie was trembling, she said, “Would you rather wait here?”

“Oh, no! I don’t want to stay alone! But maybe I—I could hide in the trunk.”

They got out of the car and Effie scrambled into the luggage compartment. She left the lid open an inch so there would be fresh air.

Nancy slipped behind the wheel again and turned off the little-used, sandy road onto a well-kept gravel driveway. It swept in a great curve

toward a long rambling white house.

Nancy drove nearly a quarter of a mile. Then the path dipped under the trees, and Nancy saw that the house was a mansion. Whoever occupied it must be very wealthy. White columns supported the overhanging roof of a porte-cochère.

The young sleuth did not stop there, but headed toward the outbuildings, to the far right of it. She pulled up in front of a stable.

Quietly Nancy got out of the car. Her sweeping glance took in a nearby shed and a large coop beside it containing a number of pigeons. On the roof rested the pigeon Nancy had been following.

The yard was empty. Except for the cooing and flutterings of the birds, the place was silent. Was it deserted? Nancy wondered.

Suddenly she was startled by a noise that sounded like a pistol shot. She whirled. In the shadow of the stable doorway stood a dark, thin-faced man wearing a riding habit. He carried a long, knotted, leather whip which he cracked again.

With an unpleasant grin, he said, “Scared you, didn’t I?”

Keeping her voice cool and even, Nancy said, “Good morning. Is the owner here?”

“Nope,” he said, studying her carefully. “What do you want?”

“I’d like to buy some pigeons,” Nancy said.

“They’ll be expensive,” he said. “Ours are specially trained to fly both day and night. How many birds you want?”

“Two,” Nancy replied. “Do you take care of these all by yourself?” she asked casually, hoping to get a lead on how many men worked at the place.

“Sure,” he said. As he walked toward the coop, he spotted the pigeon on top of it. “Oh—oh!” he exclaimed softly. “So you finally got here!” He hurried over and picked up the pigeon.

The keeper looked it over curiously, then opened the capsule on the bird’s leg. With sinking heart, Nancy remembered that the message was no longer there. She had intended to replace it before releasing the pigeon, but the bird’s sudden escape had made this impossible.

When the man saw that the capsule was empty, he bit his lip and frowned. After putting the pigeon into the coop, he turned and walked back to Nancy, his eyes narrowing.

“It’s a lovely house and grounds,” she remarked innocently. “Who

lives here?"

"I'm kind of busy this morning," he said curtly. "What kind of birds you want?"

"Any healthy pair will do," Nancy replied.

While they had been talking, the man's eyes had roved over the convertible and now he gazed at Nancy as if he were trying to make up his mind about something. Had he recognized her? Had Adam Thorne warned his accomplices to be on the lookout for her?

Suddenly the man said, "Okay. I'll get you a pair. You pay inside the house."

"Oh, no," Nancy thought. "I won't risk that. I think I'd better be ready to leave fast!"

As the pigeon keeper walked toward the coop, Nancy got back into the car and started the motor. Instantly he turned and hurried back.

"Hold it!" he said sharply. "I think you'd better come with me and pick out your own birds."

Nancy's heart began to thump. "No, thank you," she said coolly. "You can do it."

"Get out!" the man snarled and swiftly seized Nancy's arm with one hand. He tossed away the whip and reached into the car to turn off the motor.

Suddenly a weird sound came from the rear of the car. *Effie!* It sounded as if she was having an attack of hysterical giggles!

Startled, the man let go of Nancy's arm. "What's that?"

Instantly Nancy released the brake and roared off in reverse. In a shower of gravel she turned, then sped past the house and down the driveway. Fearing pursuit, she kept going for about three miles until she reached the small settlement of West Gramby. Here the young detective turned into the parking area of an old-fashioned frame hotel. Quickly she got out and raised the trunk lid.

"Okay, Effie, you can come out now."

"Oh, Nancy, I'm sorry if I spoiled everything," said the red-faced girl as she jumped down. "When I heard that man order you to get out of the car, boy, was I scared! I wanted to scream, but all I could do was make a crazy laugh."

Nancy smiled. "Never mind. Your giggles saved the day."

To calm the excited girl, Nancy suggested that they have lunch in

the hotel coffee shop. While waiting for their order, Nancy phoned a neighbor of the Drews and asked her to give Hannah Gruen some lunch, and tell her that the girls would be home in an hour. Then Nancy questioned the hotel manager about the estate she had seen.

"The owner's name is Adolf Tooker," the man said, "and that's really all anybody knows about him. He's lived there a year or so, but he keeps to himself."

"Then he doesn't bother his neighbors?"

The hotel manager scowled. "His plane does, though, flying all hours of the day and night."

"Plane?" Nancy repeated.

"Little tan one, with a flying horse—or something—on the fuselage."

So she had been right! The pigeon had been released from the plane. Nancy was quietly elated, for she felt sure she had found the gang's hideout. But suddenly she remembered: *there were no larkspur!* And she had not seen a gate.

"The kidnappers must have two hideouts," Nancy decided. "The pigeons and the plane are used for messages and transportation between them."

When she and Effie reached home, they went at once to Hannah's room and told her about the pigeon incident. "You're having plenty of excitement, Nancy." The housekeeper sighed. "And here I am cooped up and no use at all!"

Nancy hugged her. "You've helped me so often you deserve a rest! And now I must call Bess and George."

When Bess heard about the invitation to the Comings', she gave a whoop of delight. "Guess what?" she said. "I just finished talking to Dave. He and Burt are going to that very lake as camp counselors. It happened suddenly, when three old counselors dropped out. You'll probably hear from Ned soon. And now tell me more about the Comings' mystery."

Nancy related it briefly, then phoned George. "I'll be ready whenever you say, Nancy."

Just before dinner that evening Nancy made up a bouquet of flowers from her garden and took it to the neighbor who had given Hannah lunch. On the way back, she noticed a black sedan parked across from the Drew house. Two men were seated in it with their hats pulled low. When they noticed her looking at them, the driver

pulled away quickly.

"I wonder who they are," she mused.

Nancy unlocked the front door but could not push it open. She tried harder. It still stuck. What had happened during her absence?

"Effie!" she called loudly through the crack.

In a few seconds an answer came. "Okay, I'll open it."

There was the sound of something heavy being dragged over the floor. Effie, pale and trembling, opened the door. "I put the living-room couch and a big chair here to keep those men out," she explained.

"What men?" Nancy asked.

"The ones in the car across the street. They—they tried to force their way in here, but I slammed the door in their faces."

"Good for you," said Nancy, both alarmed and amused. "Who were they?"

"I dunno."

"Well, they've gone, Effie, so don't worry."

Nancy herself was greatly concerned and peered from the window several times. The black sedan drove past every few minutes. It was not the one in which Dr. Spire had been kidnapped. Just before Mr. Drew arrived at dinnertime, the car parked once more in front of a house a few doors away. Nancy mentioned it to her father and asked if the police should be notified.

"Not yet," the lawyer said. "That would only scare them off. I want to find out what they're up to."

"I have an idea," said Nancy, and told him what had happened the night before and during the day. "The keeper passed along the pigeon story, of course, so they know I've seen one of their hideouts. And they probably suspect I have the note that was in the capsule. I think they tried to force their way in here to intimidate me so that I wouldn't call the police—or to take revenge on me if I had."

Mr. Drew frowned. "Nancy, you are in great danger. You must get away—and secretly."

"Shall I go to the Comings'?"

"Good idea."

"But how can I leave secretly, Dad?"

“I have the solution to that problem,” he replied. “I’ll give you my surprise present now.”

CHAPTER VIII

Over the Wall!

"A SURPRISE!" Nancy exclaimed. "How could that keep those men from following me?"

Her father smiled. "Can't you guess?"

Nancy's eyes suddenly sparkled. "Oh, I think I know. Dad, you didn't! It isn't!"

The lawyer laughed. "I did and it is. Your new convertible is at Packlin Motors. I was going to surprise you with it next week, but I'll have Mr. French bring the car around as soon as it's dark outside."

"Oh, Dad, how wonderful!" said Nancy, hugging him. "You're the most generous father—" After a pause, she added, "Those men will be on the lookout for me in my old car and I'll be spinning off in a shiny new one!"

Then Nancy became serious. "I must leave here without their seeing me. You could have Mr. French bring the new car to the street behind our house. I'll sneak out the back way."

"That's what I thought," said Mr. Drew.

While he called Packlin Motors, Nancy hurried upstairs and told Hannah the news, then packed a suitcase for her visit at Sylvan Lake.

After dinner she called the Comings to say she would be there later in the evening. Helen's grandmother was delighted.

At nine o'clock both the doorbell and the telephone rang at once. As Mr. Drew headed for the door, Nancy picked up the phone. Bess was calling to say that the cousins would meet her at the lake the next day. "Mother will drive us out. Sorry we can't leave now."

"That's okay."

When Nancy entered the living room a muscular young man was talking to her father. She recognized him as Henry Durkin, superintendent of the building where Mr. Drew had his law office.

"Henry's going to help us, Nancy," her father explained as she walked into the room. "I called him while you were packing. Hannah

can stay with her sister while you're away. Henry will drive her and Effie there after we've gone."

"Are you coming with me, Dad?" Nancy asked, surprised.

"I certainly am," he said firmly. "I'm taking no chances on your being alone if those men pick up your trail. After Henry takes Hannah and Effie, he will drive my car to the Cornings', pick me up, and take me to the airport. I have a conference in Chicago tomorrow and a reservation on the midnight plane."

Henry Durkin frowned. "Mr. Drew, if I were you I'd call the cops."

"That'll be your job as soon as Nancy and I leave the house," the lawyer said. "I don't want those men in the car disturbed until then. As long as they're parked on this street, we know where they are. Nancy," he added, "as soon as I reach the airport I'll call Lieutenant Mulligan and tell him about the Tooker estate. Now we must hurry."

While Henry Durkin brought Nancy's bag downstairs, she rummaged in the back of her closet and found an old suitcase. She carried it to the hall below where her father was waiting.

"I have an idea, Dad. Suppose I take my old car out of the garage and park it at the curb. If Mr. Durkin carries this suitcase out and puts it in the luggage compartment, the men in the sedan will surely think I'm leaving in that car."

"Good," said Mr. Drew. He switched on the porch light. "We'll make the front of the house as conspicuous as possible."

"And meanwhile," Nancy said with a smile, "we'll slip out the back door." When her car was in place she gave the empty bag to Henry. "Carry that as if it's full and heavy," she said with a chuckle.

As he went out the door, Nancy stepped out onto the porch and called loudly and clearly, "Thanks a lot, Henry. Put it in the back."

Then she went inside and followed her father to the unlighted kitchen. He was carrying her bag and his own. Together, they stepped outdoors and peered into the darkness. They wondered uneasily if there were any unseen watchers. Quietly they felt their way toward the rear of the garden.

Nancy was first to reach the high brick walL With the help of the tough vines growing over it, she pulled herself to the top.

"Hand up the bags," she whispered.

Mr. Drew did so and began to climb the wall. By now Nancy's eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and suddenly she saw a

figure detach itself from the shadow of the garage and disappear down the driveway.

"Dad!" she whispered. "Someone was watching!"

"We must move fast then," he said, and dropped the bags to the ground in the adjoining back yard.

Nancy leaped down, landing lightly a moment before her father. Mr. Drew grabbed the suitcases and they sped through the neighbors' yard, then down the driveway to the sidewalk.

At the curb stood a beautiful convertible, its polished metal reflecting light from the street lamp several houses away. Despite their desperate hurry, Nancy felt a thrill of excitement.

"My new car!" she whispered.

As she reached it, a figure stepped from the shadows and her heart pounded. But a second later she relaxed.

"Here are the keys, Mr. Drew," said a deep voice.

"Mr. French!" exclaimed the lawyer as he tossed the two bags into the back seat. "Many thanks. Sorry we're in such a rush. Nancy's old car is in front of our house. The keys are inside. Will you pick it up? Nancy can come tomorrow and change license plates."

"How beautiful this is!" Nancy said.

She slipped into the driver's seat and turned on the ignition. A deep purr came from the motor. At the same time, the young sleuth glanced into the rear-view mirror and saw headlights sweep around the corner.

"I think they're coming!" she said.

The next instant her car was zipping forward. Nancy turned the corner and several more after that. Then she slid into a driveway and switched off the lights. A moment later the black sedan raced down the street and disappeared in the distance. Its license plate was dangling so she could not read the number.

As Nancy gave a long sigh, Mr. Drew patted her hand. "You certainly used your head that time."

"Thanks, Dad."

She enjoyed the drive to the lake, sensing the power of the new car. Finally she said, "I loved my old car, Dad. It did a good job for me, but this one is just marvelous."

"Glad you're pleased, Nancy. You certainly handle it like a pro."

At the lake the Comings welcomed the Drews cordially. Over cool drinks, the elderly couple reported that the houseman had not returned, nor had the circle of blue fire been seen that evening.

"We're still worried," their hostess said. "Mr. Drew, it's kind of you to lend Nancy to us."

He grinned appreciatively at the implied compliment.

Presently Henry Durkin arrived. Mr. Drew quickly said good night to the Cornings, kissed Nancy, cautioned her to be very careful, and left for the airport.

Shortly afterward, Mrs. Corning went with Nancy to the room with twin beds that she had occupied the night before. "Would you like your friends to be in here with you, Nancy?"

"It would be nice."

"Then we'll put in a cot tomorrow morning."

As Nancy unpacked, her thoughts turned to the missing servant. Since the fiery circle had not appeared after he vanished, possibly it had been a signal to Morgan to leave. But why?

"Did he go willingly?" Nancy wondered.

She hoped the next day would bring news of him. But there was no letter in the morning mail nor a phone call. Nancy was inclined to think he had not left of his own volition, but had been forced to go.

Mrs. Corning looked through her letters. "I have one from Brent's Department Store," she said. "A dress I ordered has come in. I'd like to pick it up."

Nancy quickly volunteered to take her to River Heights. "I must turn in the dealer's plates on my car and get my own," she said. "Also, I have an errand at the jeweler's."

Helen's grandmother accepted the ride. While she was in Brent's, Nancy went to see if Mr. Stone had learned anything about the crest on the gold bracelet.

"I was going to call you," the jeweler said, taking her into his office. "I heard from Abelard de Gotha today." Mr. Stone handed Nancy a typewritten letter. "Read this."

> "Dear Mr. Stone:
>
> The armorial bearings described in your letter are those of the Eldridge family, the crest dating back to Henry IV of England, and the quartering on the shield marking the

union of the Eldridge house with the Gerrets in 1604.

At the time of the Louisiana Purchase, the New York branch of the family, consisting of Isaiah Eldridge, his wife Prudence and two children, received a large grant of land in what is now Missouri. I presume their descendants still live in or near St. Louis, although I have no records to prove that.

Sincerely yours,
Abelard de Gotha"

"Does that help you in any way?" Mr. Stone asked.

"Indeed it does," Nancy replied. "I'll try to reach any Eldridges in St. Louis."

Nancy thanked the jeweler and hurried back to the car. Mrs. Corning joined her a few minutes later. After new plates had been put on the car, Nancy headed for the lake. When they reached it, she went upstairs to leave her purse. As she opened the bedroom door, there was a cry of:

"Hi!" Bess and George rushed across the room and hugged her.

"Oh, Nancy, I'm so glad to see you!" Bess exclaimed.

George, with an affectionate grin, added, "You'd think we'd been separated for two years instead of two weeks!"

Bess was blond, pretty, and somewhat plump. Her cousin George, a brunette with a short hair-cut and classic features, gave every indication of being a fine athlete.

"Nancy, I'm just bursting to tell you something," said Bess.

"No!" George protested quickly. "You promised not to breathe a word."

Bess gave a great sigh. "I don't know which is harder: to keep *on* a diet or keep *in* a secret."

Nancy laughed. "How long before you'll tell me?"

"This afternoon," said George, "you'll see for yourself."

"If I don't wither from curiosity first," Nancy said, chuckling.

After lunch Mrs. Corning insisted that the girls sit on the beach to exchange news and take a swim. Though Nancy would have preferred working on the St. Louis lead, she put her plans aside to please her hostess.

Presently the three visitors appeared in swim suits and beach coats. Nancy's turquoise suit set off her smooth suntan perfectly, while Bess looked attractive in a butter-yellow one. George was a trim contrast in sea green.

"How pretty you all are!" their hostess remarked.

She led them down a back stairway, through the small utility room next to Morgan's bedroom, and out to the gravel driveway.

"There's the way to the beach," she said, showing them a footpath which led into the woods.

As the three girls started down the path, George asked, "Where did you see the blue fire?"

Nancy pointed across the slope. "Near that end of the house."

"I hope I don't see it at all," muttered Bess.

Before long, they came out on a flat, narrow bit of shoreline a short distance from a dock. A little girl of five was playing on the edge of it, while two women sunned themselves in beach chairs above the waterfront.

"Marie!" called one of the women. "Be careful!"

Nancy and her friends sat down on the dock, enjoying the attractive scenery. A circling speedboat roared toward them. The girls realized that it was going to pass very close to the dock.

Suddenly little Marie jumped up to wave. "Marie Eldridge!" cried the same woman. "Come here!"

Nancy was startled to hear the name Eldridge, but before she could question the child, Marie lost her balance and toppled into the water. The woman screamed and her companion cried out:

"The boat! It'll hit her!"

Nancy had already leaped to the end of the dock. Without hesitation she dived in after the child, directly in the path of the oncoming boat!

CHAPTER IX

Surprises

As Nancy hit the water the prow of the speedboat loomed overhead. Swiftly she put one arm around the floundering child, and placed the palm of her hand over Marie's face. At the same time Nancy plunged below.

Down, down, down! The little girl squirmed, but Nancy held her firmly. Looking up through the green water, she saw the black keel of the speedboat whiz past in a froth of bubbles.

Instantly Nancy shot to the surface. Barely thirty seconds had elapsed but it seemed like an eternity. Sunlight dazzled her eyes as the strong arms of Bess and George reached down and lifted the child to the dock.

"Marie!" Nancy panted. "Is she—is she all right?"

"She'll be okay," said George as the child began to cry. "Marie swallowed some of the lake, that's all."

By this time the two women had rushed over. "Mommy!" cried Marie. Mrs. Eldridge scooped up her small daughter and hugged her.

"My baby!" the woman murmured. As she fondled the sobbing child she looked at Nancy. "How can I ever thank you?"

"Please don't," Nancy replied softly. "I'm so glad I was here."

"I want to do something for you," said the grateful woman. "I live in the white cottage at the north end of the lake."

Nancy smiled. "Perhaps you can, Mrs. Eldridge. I would like to ask you something."

"Anything—anything," the woman said warmly. "Come sit down."

She led the girls to the beach chairs and settled down comfortably with Marie on her lap. The little girl had stopped crying and cuddled up drowsily.

The girls introduced themselves, and Nancy said, "Tell me, are you from St. Louis?"

The woman looked amazed. "Why, yes, I am. How did you know?"

“I’ve heard that an Eldridge family settled in Missouri many years ago,” said Nancy. “They were originally from New York.”

“That could have been my husband’s people,” the woman said, looking puzzled. “What’s the matter?” she added quickly, for there was a strange half-smile on Nancy’s face.

“I just can’t believe it,” Nancy said. “This must be my lucky day.”

“What do you mean?” Mrs. Eldridge asked.

“A short time ago,” Nancy began, “under rather unusual circumstances, I came into possession of an old-fashioned gold bracelet with a coat of arms on it, which I traced. It belongs to the Eldridges.”

“A gold bracelet!” the woman exclaimed, her cheeks flushing. “Was there an inscription on it?”

“ ‘To my darling Mary from Joe,’ ” Nancy replied.

The woman grew pale. “Where is the bracelet now?”

“Safe in my home in River Heights,” Nancy replied reassuringly.

“It must belong to my husband’s Aunt Mary!” Mrs. Eldridge exclaimed. “How did you get it?”

As Nancy told the story, the woman listened intently, then said, “I must call my husband at once.” She explained that he was in Richmond, Virginia, searching for his aunt.

“She has been missing since early spring. Our aunt is a very wealthy woman, rather eccentric at times. Several months ago she disappeared from her home, leaving a letter. It said she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown and was going to a sanatorium for a long rest. Aunt Mary asked us not to try finding her.”

“I’m sure she is being held not far from here,” Nancy said. “I, too, am trying to find her.”

“And Nancy will!” George declared. She and Bess told Mrs. Eldridge of their friend’s success as an amateur detective.

“Miss Drew has already done me one great service,” Mrs. Eldridge said with a smile. She shifted the drowsy child to her shoulder and rose. “I can never thank you enough,” she said as she started to leave.

Suddenly Mrs. Eldridge stopped and looked back. “I forgot to tell you: Aunt Mary has a necklace which matches the bracelet. She wore the set almost constantly from the moment Uncle Joe gave it to her sixty years ago.”

"I'm glad you told me," said Nancy. "It may be a helpful clue."

As Mrs. Eldridge walked away, Nancy said to her friends, "This has been a day of surprises!"

George grinned. "You haven't seen anything yet." She pointed out to the lake. "Take a look at that!"

A long canoe with three young men was heading toward shore. A shrill whistle split the air as one of them waved.

"Ned!" exclaimed Nancy.

"And Burt and Dave!" Bess added. "That was our secret!"

"The boys called us last night," said George, "and when we told them we were coming here, they decided to paddle over today. Ned wanted to surprise you, Nancy."

"He certainly did and it's a grand surprise," she said with a broad smile.

The canoe grated ashore and the three athletic-looking boys jumped out. All wore dark-blue Bermuda shorts with white shirts bearing the name *Camp Hiawatha.*

"Here we are!" husky, blond Burt Eddleton exclaimed with a grin. "The world's greatest camp counselors!" He was George's special friend.

Dave Evans was a rangy boy with fair hair and green eyes.

Ned Nickerson, who was tall and handsome, grinned. "Now with us at the lake you girls can have some excitement!"

George and Bess burst into laughter and even Nancy had to chuckle.

"Nancy's way ahead of you today," said George.

"She usually is," Ned remarked. "Tell us about it. More mystery?"

"Two of them," said George. "And a rescue!"

Walking up the hill to the Comings' house, Nancy told the boys all that had happened, passing lightly over the speedboat episode.

Ned gave a low whistle. "You're on two dangerous cases, I'm afraid, Nancy."

"Don't forget you can count on us," Burt said as they entered the utility room.

Through an open door straight ahead they saw Mrs. Corning in the kitchen. She was happy to meet the boys and at once invited the three couples to the yacht club dance across the lake the next night. "My

husband and I belong and would love to have you go as our guests."

"I'm sure we can get time off from our camp duties," said Ned. "We'll accept. Thank you."

Presently the boys said good-by. "We have to get back to our young charges," Dave remarked. "See you tomorrow."

The girls dressed quickly and helped their hostess prepare a dinner of steak, potatoes, green beans, and watermelon. Afterward, they insisted upon tidying the kitchen without her assistance.

It was twilight by the time they finished. Nancy excused herself and slipped out the front door. Carrying a flashlight, she headed for the spot in the woods where she and Helen had seen the blue fire. After examining the singed leaves, Nancy concentrated on the ground beneath them. There were some bits of scorched brown wrapping paper. Picking them up, she wondered if they might help to explain the fire display. Nancy then hurried to her room and put the pieces away in an envelope.

"Maybe Ned can analyze them," she said to herself. "I'll check with him tomorrow night."

Though the group watched intently, the blue fire did not appear that evening. Before going to bed, Nancy told the Comings that she was afraid Morgan might have been kidnapped. "Perhaps you ought to inform the police."

Mr. Corning shook his head. "Morgan asked us not to," he said. "I'll give him another thirty-six hours."

Next day there was still no sign of the missing houseman and Nancy asked for permission to search his room.

"Go right ahead," said Mrs. Corning.

It was an attractive room with a large window overlooking the lake. Quickly and efficiently Nancy searched, but could find no clue to the man's whereabouts. She observed that the servant could leave the house by going through the utility room and out the side door without anyone seeing him.

"Has he a key to the doors?" Nancy asked Mrs. Corning.

"Oh, yes. He usually came and went by the side door so he wouldn't bother us."

"Did he have many friends?" Nancy inquired.

"None that we know of. He was a quiet man and liked to stay by himself."

Nancy looked thoughtful. “The friendship card Morgan received makes me feel that an old acquaintance is after him for some reason. There may be a clue to this person in his references. If you still have them, may I examine the letters?”

Mrs. Corning was not sure where the papers were. “I’ll look for them tomorrow.”

After lunch Nancy, Bess, and George drove to the eastern outskirts of River Heights to search for the larkspur house. They were riding along a shady country road. Nancy stopped in front of a small home where a woman was trimming the hedge. Under a nearby tree sat an old lady, shelling peas.

“Excuse me,” said Nancy, “we’re trying to find a large house in this area that has lots of larkspur or bluebells around it. Do you know of such a place?”

“Can’t say I do,” the woman replied.

“What’d she say?” the old lady asked loudly.

“Nothing, Mother. Just some house they’re looking for. She’s deaf,” the woman added to Nancy.

“I heard *that*!” the mother said tartly. “And I heard ‘house’ and ‘bluebells.’ They’re lookin’ for the bluebell house. And I know just where it is!”

CHAPTER X

An Unwelcome Gift

"You girls listen to me!" the old lady shouted. "The house you want is over in the next township, just outside of Milford. Go right down Elm Road. You can't miss it."

The woman standing by the hedge shook her head. "I never heard you mention that place before, Mother."

The old lady's black eyes snapped. "I know lots I don't tell," she said.

The girls thanked the two women and drove off, excited at the lead. But as they neared the small town of Milford, Bess looked worried. "I'm beginning to wish I'd stayed home," she said. "I really don't want to meet any kidnappers."

"Now don't be a snob," George teased her cousin.

"It's all right for you to make jokes," Bess replied, "but I can't help it if I'm not brave like you two."

Nancy smiled. "I can remember times on some of my cases when you were way ahead of us."

"I surprised myself," Bess admitted.

Nancy spotted the sign marking Elm Road and turned into the narrow, treeless street.

"There it is!" exclaimed George. In the middle of the block was a yard full of bluebells.

"You mean there it *isn't,"* Nancy said gloomily as she pulled up in front of the white cottage. A faded sign BLUEBELL HOUSE hung by the door. "No mansion, no fence, no gate!"

"But whoever lives here must be interested in bluebells," said Bess. "Maybe they could help you."

"Good idea," Nancy said, and the three girls went up the walk to the door.

Their knock was answered by a thin, young woman wearing an apron. "Hello, girls," she said cheerfully. "I guess you want to see the

china. Come on in!"

She walked quickly into a room off the hall, beckoning them to follow. Nancy tried to explain, but stopped short at the door of the room. Shelves and tables were filled with flowered china.

"All hand-painted," the girl said. "The prices are marked."

"Oh, how beautiful!" Bess exclaimed.

While she and George looked around, Nancy explained to the girl why they had called.

"There's no place like that around Milford," she said, "but have you tried the Brookdale section west of River Heights? I've heard there used to be lots of estates out that way."

Nancy thanked her and Bess bought three hand-painted cups and saucers.

"There's one for each of us," she said when they reached the car. "A souvenir of a wild-goose chase."

"It may not have been so hopeless after all," said Nancy, and repeated what the girl had said.

George looked thoughtful. "You told us Dr. Spire rode about an hour to get to the house. Can't we narrow the search by going only to places that are about an hour from the road where the old sedan was parked?"

"We could," Nancy said. "But the chances are that the kidnappers drove a little longer than necessary just to confuse the doctor."

George grinned. "Nancy, you never miss a trick!"

A further search continued for some time but without success. Finally Bess reminded Nancy of the dance that night. "We'd better go home," she advised.

Hours later Nancy was seated with Ned on a bench outside the gaily lighted porch of the yacht club. Lively music and singing came pulsing out the wide open doors and windows.

"On a hunch I brought something for the chemistry expert," she said, and handed him the envelope containing the bits of paper she had picked up in the woods.

"I'm no expert," he protested. Ned's eyes filled with mischief. "You don't expect me to look at this, do you, when I could be looking at you?"

Nancy blushed and laughed. She was wearing a simple rose-colored

formal and her hair was piled high with a gardenia tucked in it.

"Please be serious," she said. "I have a hunch that the burning circle is made of fireworks which are carried by someone. I remembered that you once helped make a fireworks display at college."

Ned spilled the bits of paper into his palm. He looked at them carefully.

"Your hunch is right, Nancy. These are fragments of quickmatch."

"What's that?" she asked.

"The fuse which is used to light fireworks." He explained that it was a string coated with a mixture of gunpowder and glue and enclosed in a brown paper tube. "Then that's attached to the lances."

"And what are they?" Nancy queried.

"Paper tubes filled with chemical mixtures which burn different colors. The circle you saw is probably a wooden frame with long nails sticking out of it about an inch apart.

"The lances are forced upright onto the points of the nails. Then the quickmatch is nailed across the tops of the lances. It's rough to do," he added, "because the lances are very hard, and many times the nail goes into your finger instead. Well, does that help you?"

"Yes. If I can find out where the fireworks were bought and by whom, I may have a good lead."

The rest of the evening was pure fun and ended with supper on several of the members' yachts moored to the club's dock. While taking their dates home, the three boys invited them to a swimming meet at the camp the next afternoon and the invitation was accepted.

By one o'clock the girls were ready for bed. Bess and George dropped off to sleep at once, but Nancy lay awake. Suddenly she sat up. There had been a noise downstairs. Quickly she put on robe and slippers, then grabbed a flashlight from her suitcase.

Slipping past her sleeping friends, Nancy went quietly down the back stairs. At the bottom she heard a scraping sound in the utility room.

Softly she opened the door and flashed on her light. Caught in the beam was a white-faced, frightened figure on his hands and knees. He looked up. The missing man!

"Morgan!" Nancy exclaimed. "What are you doing? Where have you been?"

"I—I dropped the door key," he stammered.

Nancy spotted the key and picked it up.

"Thank you. I was moving things, feeling around for it. Sorry I disturbed you."

"Morgan, we've been very worried about you," Nancy said. "Won't you please tell me what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong!" the man said quickly. "I'll explain in the morning."

He opened the door to his bedroom, stepped inside, and locked the door behind him. Nancy wondered if she should awaken her hostess to report the servant's return, but decided against this.

In the morning, before breakfast, Mrs. Corning told the girls Morgan had already talked to her and her husband. She said he had begged forgiveness, and had told a rambling story about going to help a friend.

"I'm afraid it's not true, but we don't want to discharge him." She sighed, then said, "Here, I almost forgot."

She handed Nancy the names of the three persons who had written letters of recommendation for the houseman.

"If you don't mind," said Nancy, "I'll phone these men after breakfast."

An hour later she came down from the second-floor phone and reported to the Cornings in the living room.

"Well, what did they say?" asked the old gentleman.

"None of these people ever heard of Morgan."

The couple sat thunderstruck.

“Morgan!” Nancy exclaimed. “What are you doing?”

“Then the letters were forged?” said Mrs. Corning.

"I'm afraid so," Nancy told her.

"Impossible!" snorted Mr. Coming. "I remember talking to one of those men on the telephone."

"You must have spoken to an impostor," said Nancy.

"But—but why would Morgan do this?" asked Mrs. Corning.

"Maybe his past made it impossible for him to get recommendations any other way," said Nancy. "Whoever helped him must feel he has a hold over Morgan. Perhaps that is the 'friend' who has come back into his life."

Mrs. Coming said presently, "Now that Morgan has returned, maybe it's all over."

"I doubt it," said Nancy. "He's still frightened."

Her host spoke up. "Morgan's always been honest and a hard worker. I say we give him another chance. Do you agree, Emily?"

His wife nodded. The girls said nothing.

After church and lunch Nancy looked through the advertising pages of the telephone directory for fireworks companies in the area, but found none. As she put the book away, there was a sharp knock on the front door. Nancy went to open it.

No one was there, but on the stoop was a long, narrow parcel wrapped in brown paper. It was addressed to Morgan. Suspicious, Nancy went to tell the Comings about it.

"Under the circumstances," she said, "would you like to open this before Morgan does?"

"No," her hostess said firmly. "I feel that what's Morgan's business is his business. Take the parcel to him, Nancy."

With misgivings, she carried the package to the kitchen and handed it to the houseman. He stared at it and began to tremble. With shaking fingers Morgan removed the string and paper. He seemed lost in thought and unaware that Nancy was still in the room.

When Morgan opened the paper and saw the contents, his face turned white and he suddenly slumped to the floor.

In the package lay a few stalks of blue larkspur!

CHAPTER XI

A Hazardous Drop

QUICKLY Nancy knelt beside the unconscious servant.

"Morgan!" she said urgently, and lightly slapped his cheek. He did not stir. She wet a clean towel at the sink and patted his face.

A few moments later he moaned and muttered, "Last warning—tomorrow night—" Then his eyes opened and with Nancy's help he managed to sit up.

She called the others and while Mrs. Corning telephoned the doctor, the girls assisted the man to his room. Mr. Corning seated himself beside the bed, but Morgan would speak to no one.

In a short time Dr. Bennett, an old friend of the family, arrived. He said the houseman had suffered a slight heart attack, and ordered him kept quiet.

"That means no questions," Nancy thought. She had been mulling over the significance of the larkspur in the package. She put them in a vase. When the doctor had gone, she led the rest of the group into the living room and told the whole story.

"Larkspur again!" exclaimed George. "I don't get it!"

"That's one of the clues in your other case, Nancy," Bess said, puzzled.

"Probably the two are connected," the young sleuth replied. She told the Comings briefly about Mary Eldridge.

Bess looked surprised. "Why, what could Morgan have to do with the old lady's kidnappers?"

"But Morgan has always been the soul of honesty," protested Mrs. Corning.

"Perhaps not *always,"* Nancy said gently. "I believe he may have a prison record—under another name, of course. It would explain why he needed forged recommendations. Now Adam Thorne wants repayment."

"Adam Thorne!" exclaimed George. "Why him?"

"Because all the years Morgan worked for the Comings, no one bothered him, but after Adam Thorne broke out of prison, the friendship card arrived and the blue fire began."

Mr. Corning stirred uneasily. "You spoke of repayment. What did you mean?"

"I think Thorne and his gang want to rob this house. Remember, the friendship card had no written message on it, but the picture showed a cottage with the door open."

"I see," said Bess. "That was the message—open the door."

Mrs. Corning was pale. "Do you know when it is to be?"

"Tomorrow night, I think," replied Nancy. "I believe the larkspur was a signal to Morgan—his last chance to cooperate. Probably the gang showed the blue fire and abducted Morgan to intimidate him."

Mr. Corning's face flushed with anger. "Scoundrels! We'll get the police at once!"

"Wait!" said Nancy. "This is only a theory. If we hold off until tomorrow night, we'll see if we're right. Maybe we can catch the thieves red-handed and solve both cases at once."

"But, in the meantime," George said worriedly, "Morgan may have told the gang where you are."

Nancy nodded. "Yes, I've thought of that."

When Mr. Drew telephoned her a few minutes later he had disquieting news. The lawyer had reported to the police before flying to Chicago and asked them to keep in touch with him.

"Lieutenant Mulligan informed me they had not been able to trace the kidnap car. Also, when they arrived at the Tooker estate it was deserted. The gang took the pigeons."

"I understand, Dad. My visit forced them to run. They'll be more eager than ever to get me out of the picture."

An hour later Nancy, Ned, and their friends were watching the swimming races at Camp Hiawatha. In the fun and excitement she found it hard to remember the threat of danger. Cheers and singing filled the air as the young campers put all their high-spirited enthusiasm into the contests.

When the swimming meet was over, she said, "It was great, Ned! Your little boys did so well!"

"Thanks," he said proudly. "Now we can go swimming. Burt and

Dave and I have free time."

The boys showed their guests where to change into suits they had brought, then met them at the water's edge. Tons of ocean sand had been transported overland to make a beach for the camp. A float was moored a few rods from shore with a tower and springboard for diving.

The three couples swam out to the float on which a dozen young people were frolicking. Ned introduced everyone.

"Oh, you're the detective," said one boy, playfully shielding his face with one arm.

Nancy laughed. "I promise not to delve into any of your secrets."

George called, "But watch out, my friend!"

Suddenly Ned asked, "How about a little diving?"

One by one the group went off the high board. Presently it became an impromptu meet.

"Nancy, show them that new one you just learned," Bess urged.

"I'll try." She smiled. "But I may flop."

As everyone watched, Nancy balanced upside down on the edge of the board for a breathtaking moment, then thrust herself off. Her body revolved in the air and straightened out so that her pointed toes cleaved the water like a knife. Down she plunged into the green waters of the lake, then bobbed to the surface to hear the cheers of the spectators.

"Wonderful! Perfect!"

Panting, Nancy climbed back onto the float. As she threw herself down in the sun to rest, Ned came over. "That was a beauty, Nancy."

"Just luck," she insisted.

Later, when Nancy swam ashore with her friends, she was met by Mr. Dennis, the camp director. "Great diving exhibition, young lady! How would you like a job as counselor?"

"Thank you," Nancy said, smiling, "but I already have a job."

"Well, you and your friends stay to dinner," the man said cordially, "and the evening camp."

As he walked away, a bugle sounded. "We fellows must go now," said Dave, "but we'll take you home tonight after taps."

Nancy called Mrs. Corning to tell her they would not be home for

dinner, then the girls went to the guest dining hall.

During the meal two small boys appeared at their table with their arms full of parkas.

“Ned and Dave and Burt sent you their coats,” piped the tallest.

“ ‘Cause you didn’t bring yours,” said the other. They put the jackets on an empty chair and fled as the girls thanked them.

It grew chilly after dinner and the trio were glad to put on the parkas and pull up the hoods.

George flapped her dangling sleeves. “What a great fit this is!”

“Now you can’t tell us apart,” said Bess.

When it was dark, a long line of singing boys filed up a hill behind the camp. The girls followed their bobbing flashlights. At the top, the three stopped to look around. The wooded hill sloped steeply to a rocky drop-off. Fifteen feet below it was a huge bonfire.

The girls watched the campers wind slowly down the path, and saw that the first ones were already seated on another slope to the far side of the fire.

“Come on,” said Nancy, “but watch your step.”

She went first, with George beside her and Bess on the right. As they picked their way downward they could hear the giant blaze crackling.

Smoke billowed up and Bess paused, coughing. Suddenly a powerful push from behind knocked Bess off her feet.

Screaming, she began to roll down the hill toward the drop-off and the leaping flames!

CHAPTER XII

The Crystal Garden

"BESS!" George exclaimed, horror-stricken. "She'll roll into the fire!"

Nancy scrambled down the hill, George beside her. With a flying leap she threw herself on Bess and stopped her from rolling. At the same time, George skidded down and caught one of her cousin's flailing arms. The girls lay gasping, only a few feet from the drop-off and the bonfire below.

"Bess," Nancy whispered, "are you hurt?"

"N-no," Bess said shakily. "Oh, Nancy, somebody pushed me! If you and George hadn't..."

Nancy looked grim. "I think someone mistook you for me. And I don't want him to know he was wrong."

As she spoke, three counselors hurried down the hill toward them, calling, "What happened? Anybody hurt?"

Nancy squeezed George's hand. "We'll pretend *I* am," she whispered, then closed her eyes.

"Yes," George called out. "Nancy Drew! Please hurry. I'm afraid it's bad."

"She's unconscious!" quavered Bess.

Moments later, a husky counselor was carrying Nancy up the hill while one of his companions ran ahead for the camp doctor.

"And get Ned Nickerson," George called.

Forty minutes later Ned tenderly placed Nancy on the Comings' living-room couch as Helen's grandmother closed the draperies.

"Okay," said Ned. "All clear." Only then did Nancy open her eyes and sit up.

"You're some actress, young lady," said Mr. Corning.

Nancy smiled. "I didn't have to do anything. Ned and Bess and George were the real actors."

Bess giggled. "And the camp director and the doctor were good

actors, too. Mr. Dennis insisted that we use his station wagon to bring Nancy home."

"I just hope we fooled the one who pushed Bess," said Nancy.

"Morgan must have told the gang you were here," said George, "and one of them trailed us to the camp, waiting for the opportune moment to strike."

Ned frowned. "Someone probably is still watching this house. To make our act look really good, we ought to call the doctor for Nancy."

Mrs. Corning hurried off to put in the call. Soon she returned, and she reported that Dr. Bennett would be glad to cooperate.

Nancy chuckled. "We'll make the gang think I'm out of action. Then they'll pay no more attention to me and I can work freely."

George spoke up. "I have a suggestion. If someone is watching this house, he'll probably plan to speak to Morgan. How about Bess and me letting ourselves out the back door and watching?"

"I'll do it," Ned offered.

"No," Mr. Corning said. "That would look too suspicious. I often take a little stroll outside before going to bed. In a few minutes one of you can follow me. While I'm out there no gangster will come to talk to Morgan through the window."

He waved aside objections and left the room.

His wife said worriedly, "Oh, I hope everything will be all right. But suppose they strike here tomorrow night?"

"I have a plan," Nancy replied, "if Ned and Burt and Dave will help us."

"Sure we will," said Ned. "It's not our night off, but I know three fellows who'll switch with us."

"The thieves probably will go for the safe," said Bess.

Mrs. Coming shook her head. "I'm afraid they're after something very special. Come," she added, seeing the questioning expressions of her guests, "I'll show you."

As their hostess led the way down the hall, Nancy quietly outlined her plan to Ned. "I'll tell the others later."

Across the hall from the kitchen, Mrs. Coming opened a door and flicked a wall switch. The room remained dark, but at the far side a tall glass cabinet lighted up.

Bess gasped. “Oh, how beautiful!” She and the others stared, amazed. Inside was a sparkling array of crystal flowers and butterflies set on shelves lined with black velvet.

“My husband gave me one of each on our wedding anniversaries,” Mrs. Corning explained as she led them to the case. “They are made in France. Every flower contains at least one valuable jewel.”

Nancy noted a ruby glowing in the heart of a rose and a topaz set in a daffodil. The butterflies had diamonds for eyes.

“How could the thieves have heard about these?” George asked.

“My crystal garden was written up in a magazine some time ago,” Mrs. Corning replied.

Nancy examined the case carefully. “Do you have a key for this?”

Mrs. Corning showed her a tiny gold one which she wore on a chain around her neck.

Just then the doctor arrived. He listened to the story of what had happened, then went to check on Morgan, who was much better.

When leaving, Dr. Bennett called back through the open door for the benefit of any outside listener. “Miss Drew must remain in bed for at least forty-eight hours.”

Ned followed the doctor and went to join Mr. Corning. Inside the house Nancy said to her friends, “Dr. Bennett played his part well.” Then she told them her plans for the next day.

Half an hour later Mr. Corning and Ned reported no prowler near Morgan’s window. Ned said good night and returned to Camp Hiawatha.

Shortly before dawn, Nancy ate a light breakfast, then slipped into the garage and hid behind the front seat of her car. At eight o’clock the other girls came out with a packet of sandwiches. George took the wheel and they drove off.

When she was sure they were not being followed, George pulled to the side of the road and Nancy took the driver’s seat.

“Now for the larkspur house!” she said happily.

“But where is it?” Bess asked.

Nancy said that since the Tooker estate lay southeast of River Heights and the pigeon and airplane both flew over it, the other headquarters were probably to the northwest.

“I’ll try that, anyway.”

After a while the road narrowed and there were no houses to be seen. The countryside was generously sprinkled with patches of woodland and open fields.

The girls explored every side road. Most of these were merely lumber trails which ended within a short distance. At other times the searchers found a cabin and inquired if there was a sanatorium in the neighborhood. The answer was always No, and again Nancy would go on.

Stopping only to eat their sandwiches, the girls rode all day, exploring the network of winding lanes. All three were tired, their nerves tense with the strain of being constantly on the alert.

Finally Nancy glanced at the clock on the dashboard. “Ten minutes past five,” she said. “We’d better go back.”

Nancy turned the car and began retracing the route to the main highway. Suddenly she pressed down on the brake and they stopped short.

“Sorry,” Nancy said, “but we just passed a sign that I didn’t see when we drove along here before.”

She backed a dozen feet and halted opposite a narrow dirt road. Nailed to a tree was a crude, hand-lettered board: L. S. LANE.

“What about it?” Bess asked. “That probably leads to the cabin of a lumberman whose name is L. S. Lane.”

“And on the other hand,” said Nancy, “it could mean Larkspur Lane, and be a guide for the crooks.”

“It’s worth investigating,” George remarked.

Nancy turned into the narrow roadway, wide enough for only one car. But here and there the side bank had been cut to allow a vehicle to park while another passed it.

Proceeding cautiously over ruts and bumps, Nancy presently pulled into one of the wider places on the right. She stopped the car close to the trees.

“This might be the right place, so we had better go on foot,” Nancy said.

She led the way among the trees, keeping parallel with the road. The girls trudged through the underbrush for nearly a quarter of a mile but saw nothing unusual. The only sounds were the crackle of twigs breaking underfoot.

Suddenly Nancy halted. “Look!” she exclaimed softly. “Larkspur!”

A dozen yards ahead the trees ended. Just beyond was a high wire-mesh fence. Inside it grew a long border of exquisite tall larkspur.

To the girls' left a large gate across the lane shut off the entrance to the grounds. Next to it stood a small brown lodge.

"This is it!" Nancy whispered gleefully, and her friends nodded.

Beyond the gate the ground sloped gently. A gravel roadway led to the top of the rise, where a large white colonial dwelling with a broad veranda was visible among some trees.

"It's a beautiful place," Bess said in a low voice. "I can't believe crooks live here."

"We'll soon find out," said Nancy.

Cautiously the three girls moved forward, taking advantage of every tree trunk and bush for concealment. There was no sign of habitation. If anyone was inside the gatehouse, he was not to be seen at the moment. Then, for an instant, a flash of white appeared in the distance near the brow of the hill.

"Did you see that?" George whispered tensely. "I'm sure it was a nurse's uniform."

"Listen! Do you hear a plane?" Nancy asked.

The girls peered upward. Several minutes passed before the aircraft became visible. Then it shot overhead, flying low.

"It's the same type plane that wounded the bird!" Nancy said quickly. "And it's like the one the hotel manager said flew into the Tooker estate. ... Yes, there is that flying horse on the fuselage. This is the place!"

"Sure enough," said George. "Down he goes. The landing field must be behind the house."

The plane dipped low, lost altitude rapidly, and vanished behind the roof of the mansion.

"Now what do we do?" Bess asked.

"There is only one thing left," Nancy answered. "Somehow we must get inside!"

CHAPTER XIII

Baiting a Thief

GEORGE frowned. “You’re not going to try getting into this place now, are you?”

“No,” said Nancy. “I’d probably end up a prisoner.” She thought of the old lady who was being held against her will.

“It’s getting late,” Bess put in. “We’d better go back to the Comings’.”

“Yes,” Nancy agreed reluctantly. “We have our work cut out for us tonight.”

“Why don’t you just tell the police where the sanatorium is?” Bess asked nervously. “Let them rescue Mrs. Eldridge.”

Nancy shook her head. “We must get her to safety before the police raid starts. Otherwise, the gang might harm the poor woman to keep her from talking. We’ll have to find out exactly where they’re keeping her prisoner in the mansion.”

“It’s such a big house,” Bess said gloomily, “Mrs. Eldridge might be hard to find.”

“It’s also possible she’s not here any more,” George said. “The gang knows the police are after them and they may have moved her.”

When they reached the car, Nancy hid in the back again and George drove. At the Comings’ Bess was asked to go in first and make sure Morgan was in his room.

“No use having him learn my secret,” Nancy remarked. “Thorne might get it out of him before I’m ready to have it known.” Learning the coast was clear, she scooted up to her room.

Mrs. Corning had dinner ready, so a tray was prepared for Nancy. The others ate in the dining room, then went upstairs.

“Now tell us your plan for capturing the thieves if they come,” Mr. Corning urged.

Nancy said, “Here it is. First, remember that the crystal-garden room has two doors—one to the hall, the other to the TV room. Each

has a key that's now on the inside."

Her host nodded.

Nancy went on, "The boys will be outside. Dave will be watching in the shrubs bordering the flagstone area; Burt, at the top of the patch which leads to the dock; and Ned, on the garage roof.

"As soon as the thief—or thieves—enters the house, Ned will signal with a walkie-talkie to Mr. Dennis at the camp and he will call the police. Meanwhile, Burt and Dave will be ready to tackle anybody watching on the outside. We girls will lock any intruders in the crystal room."

"But suppose they see you?" Mrs. Corning asked.

"They won't," said Nancy. "Bess and George will hide across the hall in the kitchen. I'll be in the TV room. As soon as the thieves enter, I'll lock the adjoining door. At the same time, the girls will slip across the hall and quietly lock that door."

Mr. Corning asked what he and his wife should do.

"I suggest you go to your room as usual," Nancy replied. "That will cause less suspicion."

At nine o'clock the lights were put out on the first floor, the couple retired, and the girls took their posts. Nancy held the door to the crystal room open a crack, put the key on the outside of the lock, and watched. It seemed that she stood for ages before the other door opened.

There was a *click* and the light went on in the glass cabinet. Nancy gripped the key, ready to shut the door. Suddenly she froze. Only one figure approached the cabinet.

Morgan! A thief!

He was carrying a large suitcase, which he put on the floor. Nancy watched, hardly daring to breathe, as he took a small tool from his pocket and picked at the cabinet lock.

A few minutes later he pulled the glass door open. Then he swung back the lid of the suitcase. Nancy saw that it was divided into compartments and heavily padded with velvet.

"A special carrying case," she thought.

As the man's trembling hands reached toward a fragile crystal flower, he suddenly drew back.

"No!" he whispered hoarsely. "I can't do it!" He buried his face in

his hands with a sob.

Nancy hurried to his side. “Morgan!” she said softly. The man whirled and gave a gasp.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said quickly. “Let me help you.”

He groaned and sank into a chair beside the cabinet. “How can you know—all this?”

“I know part of it,” she replied. “Where is the gang? You were to let them in, weren’t you?”

The man stared at her, amazed.

“Yes, but Thorne changed his mind. He said I should steal the crystal flowers and deliver them in this special case he gave me. I used to be pretty good at lock picking,” he added, flushing miserably.

“That’s how Thorne got his hold over you, isn’t it?” asked Nancy. “He knew you’d been in prison and he helped forge your references.”

The thief pulled the glass door open

The houseman nodded. “I wanted to go straight and I did. I wouldn’t hurt the Comings for anything. But Thorne—He wouldn’t leave me alone. Kidnapped me. Held me on a big estate. Said the

larkspur would be the signal for this theft. I'd have to deliver—or else."

"There's a Mrs. Eldridge being held prisoner there, too," said Nancy. "Did you see her?"

"Eldridge?" Morgan repeated. "I think I heard the name, but—" Suddenly he broke off. "Listen! There they are!"

The sound of a low whistle came from outside. Nancy flew to the switch and snapped off the light in the crystal case.

"I'll close it," Morgan whispered. The door clicked shut. "What—what shall I do?" he stammered.

"Listen," Nancy said quickly. "We'll have to get them in here. I have a trap set, but you must go out and tell the men you need help—that you're too weak to carry all the loot."

"They'd never believe me. I'm no good at acting."

"There must be some way to get them in here," Nancy declared. "Suppose you just don't go out."

Morgan gave a bitter laugh. "They'll go away. And then in a day or so I'll disappear and never come back. Thorne will see to that. He won't stand for any double cross."

Nancy had an idea. "Come with me!" She led the way into the hall.

At once the kitchen door opened. "What's up?" George whispered. "Where's the gang?"

Nancy drew Morgan into the dark kitchen and explained to the girls. "But I've thought of a way to lure the gang into the house," she said. "If they find out I wasn't injured and am still working on this case, they'll come after me."

Bess caught her breath. "You don't mean you'd let them know?"

"Morgan will tell them," said Nancy. "Bess, you stay here and George will take over the door of the TV room. I'll go out with Morgan. If they don't believe him, I'll let them see me and then run in here. That should do it."

"No!" said the houseman. "I won't let you, Miss Drew. Adam Thorne is dangerous. He will stop at nothing. It's too big a risk for you."

"I'm not afraid," said Nancy.

Suddenly Morgan darted away and ran through the utility room. Nancy dashed after him, calling:

“Morgan! Come back!”

“No!” he called. “I’m telling Thorne, I won’t do it. I don’t care what happens to me!”

Nancy raced outside and grasped the panting man.

“Thorne,” he called, “I won’t do it!”

“Morgan!” Nancy cried frantically. “Come inside!”

An instant later powerful hands gripped Nancy’s shoulders and swung her away from the houseman. She reeled and fell backward in the darkness. Nancy struck the gravel driveway hard and blacked out.

CHAPTER XIV

The Matching Necklace

As NANCY'S eyes fluttered open, she saw Bess's anxious face bending over her.

"Oh, thank goodness!" Bess exclaimed. "She's coming to."

George and Mrs. Corning stood at the other side of the bed. "You're in your room, dear," said Mrs. Corning. "How do you feel?"

Nancy sat up, frowning. "My head aches, but otherwise I'm all right. What happened?"

"The boys found you on the driveway," said George. "The gang got away." She explained that the boys had seen three men scuffling and finally one had been carried off through the woods. By the time the boys had rescued Nancy, their search for the others was hopeless.

"They took Morgan, then?" Nancy asked. "I was afraid of that." She told how she had been pulled away from the houseman.

"Lucky the thug didn't know it was you," said George, "or you'd have been kidnapped, too."

"The boys are waiting in the kitchen," Bess put in. "I'll go down and tell them you're awake."

"Let's all go," said Nancy. "I think I could do with a glass of milk and some crackers, if you don't mind, Mrs. Corning."

The woman's face broke into a smile and she said, "That's the best news I've heard yet. Now I know you're feeling better."

As Bess and George served cake and glasses of milk, Nancy and the boys exchanged stories.

Dave raised his glass of milk. "Here's to General Drew!"

The others echoed the toast enthusiastically. "I guess I wasn't such a good general tonight," said Nancy. "I certainly lost the battle."

"The campaign's not over," Burt told her cheerfully.

Ned smiled and patted Nancy's shoulder. "Better luck tomorrow."

Mrs. Coming cleared her throat. "Nancy dear, I'm afraid we had

better—"

"Oh please, Mrs. Corning! I know what you're going to say—that I'd better give up the case. But please give me another day to find out exactly what's going on at Larkspur Lane."

Ned and the others backed up Nancy's plea.

Mrs. Corning hesitated. "Well, all right, but we can't wait longer than tomorrow night."

"I'll do my best to solve the mystery by then," Nancy said quietly. To herself she added, "And no mistakes, Nancy Drew!"

Next morning the girls again started out early. As before, Nancy hid in the back of the car and George drove. The sky was overcast, but Nancy's spirits were light. Some miles from the lake she took the wheel, her eyes shining with excitement.

"I don't see how you can be so cheerful," Bess grumbled. "You were knocked out last night and now you're going into more danger."

Nancy smiled. "I never felt better."

Familiar with the way now, she was able to make good time to the spot where the sign "L. S. LANE" marked the battle line.

"We're in enemy territory now," she remarked. "From now on, caution must be *our* password."

Nancy drove past the half-concealed driveway and into the woods, where she parked the car behind a tangle of creeper and bittersweet.

"No one will notice it here," Nancy said. "Now let's strike through the woods ahead and see how close we can come to the house without using the road."

Cautiously the girls worked their way around bramble and bush until the roof of the gatehouse came into view. They crept closer and looks of dismay came over their faces.

Tilted back in a chair against the gatepost was a man whom Nancy assumed was the gatekeeper. At his feet lay a brindled Great Dane, his tongue lolling and his eyes alert.

Nancy gasped. "That's the beast that tackled me at the flower show!" she whispered. "Let's hope he doesn't scent us."

George said, "There's certainly no chance of getting in here. Let's go on!"

Nancy led the way to the right, still well within the trees, always keeping the tall fence with its border of larkspur in view. After

trudging through the woods for a quarter of a mile the girls found that the fence turned to the left. It continued in a straight line up the shallow slope along the flower-lined enclosure.

"Ugh, it's rough traveling," Bess shuddered. "I'm afraid of snakes."

"Want to wait here?" George asked.

"I certainly do not," Bess retorted. "I'd be scared to death by myself."

Smothering her fears, Bess followed Nancy and George through the tangled undergrowth. At one point they came to a place where a clump of trees partially concealed the house. Nancy called a halt for rest and consultation. She and George sat down.

"This wouldn't be a good spot to climb the fence," George observed, leaning back on her elbows. "You'd rip your skirt on that barbed wire."

Nancy looked at her in surprise. "You'd do more than that! Don't you see?" she asked, pointing to the top of the enclosure.

"I see a fence and two strands of barbed wire stretched along the top," George replied.

"Notice how the wire is fastened to the supporting posts."

"It's attached to little porcelain knobs. What does that have to do with it?"

"Those knobs are insulators, which means the wire is charged with electricity. If you touch it, you will probably set off an alarm and get a bad shock besides. You could be killed."

George gave a low whistle.

"It's a regular fort," said Bess. "Yet how peaceful it all looks!"

Through the wire fence the girls could see other flower gardens, occasional clumps of trees, and a view of the rear of the gatehouse. It was truly a lovely spot, except for the sinister strands of charged wire.

"Rested?" Nancy asked. "Let's go!"

Since they were now approaching the house, the girls moved even more warily. Bess stepped gingerly, afraid of putting her foot down on a snake.

"It would be just like those people to let a couple of thousand rattlesnakes and copperheads loose around here," Bess muttered. "Ugh," the worried girl cried suddenly, and jumped sideways, clutching at her cousin. Caught off balance, George stumbled and fell,

giving a muffled yelp.

"What happened?" Nancy whispered excitedly, turning back to them.

"I stepped into a hole, and I—I think my ankle is sprained," George said, her face white.

Nancy's heart sank. If any of them should become helplessly injured, detection would certainly follow.

"Oh, it's all my fault," whispered Bess. "I'm sorry, George. I thought I stepped on something alive." Her eyes filled with tears.

George managed a grin. "Take it easy. I'm not dying."

Nancy knelt beside George, and with deft fingers felt the injured ankle, wishing that Dr. Spire were with them now!

"I'm sure it's not broken," she said softly.

George rubbed her ankle gingerly. "Go on, you two. I'll wait for you here."

"You sure you're all right?" Nancy asked.

"Yes. Go on, please."

Nancy and Bess resumed their cautious advance to the top of the rise. There they had a full view of all the grounds.

Surrounding the house was a wide lawn with gravel walks and flower beds. In the rear was a huge meadow which Nancy surmised was used as a landing field for the airplane. The craft was not in sight.

Just below the brow of the hill, and connected with the house by a long arbor, was a group of outbuildings—a carriage house evidently converted into a garage, a good-sized barn, and a chicken yard.

"Listen," Nancy said, raising a finger. "I heard cooing."

"Pigeons!" Bess exclaimed.

The girls moved ahead until they were behind the carriage house, where they saw a small wooden building which had no window on their side. Here they rested in the shade until aroused by soft cooing and the sound of a man's voice.

"You're getting better!" the listeners heard through the wooden walls. "I guess you'll be able to work again if we keep you warm with this electric light. That'll cure you!"

There was more cooing. Then the unseen man said, "You ought to be ashamed taking a couple of days getting to the boss's place and

arriving there lame at that! And why did you go to Drews', you half-witted barnyard goose?" A door closed and all was silent.

"Did you hear what that man said?" Bess asked with a catch in her voice. "He mentioned your name!"

"Yes. That was the man I met at Tooker's estate. I recognized his voice," Nancy said as she walked ahead.

Once past the outbuildings, the girls saw a lichen-covered sundial surrounded by a grassy court. In it stood a number of wheelchairs, each occupied by an old lady.

A large woman in a nurse's uniform had her back to the girls. She seemed to be administering to one of the elderly women.

"It looks like a real nursing home," Bess whispered. "Perhaps our suspicions are all wrong."

Nancy put a finger to her lips. The nurse turned and walked toward the fence.

"That's the woman who stole my handbag!" Nancy exclaimed softly.

"The one who took the bracelet?"

"Yes. She's in league with Thorne and Tooker, I feel sure."

"One of those old ladies may be Mrs. Eldridge," Bess said, "but how can we find out?"

"I don't know yet, but I'll think of something," Nancy replied. "Meanwhile, we'd better go back and help George to the car. If she were discovered, she'd have no way to escape."

The girls hurried back to their companion and the three made their way down the hill. George limped along as quickly as she could, but progress was slow. When they had nearly reached the gatehouse, the girls paused and George sat down on a stump to rest.

Suddenly Nancy seized Bess's arm and pointed among the trees. On the other side of the wire barrier was an old woman, dozing in a wheelchair.

"Stay here," Nancy whispered. "I'm going closer."

Bess clung to her friend's arm. "No! Suppose they catch you!"

"I must talk to that old lady," said Nancy. "She may be able to help us."

Nancy crept cautiously toward the fence. When she was a few feet away, still screened by bushes, she stifled a gasp. The elderly lady

wore a necklace which looked like the gold bracelet Dr. Spire had given Nancy as a clue.

"The missing Mrs. Eldridge!" Nancy murmured excitedly.

CHAPTER XV

Daring Plans

"Do I dare go closer?" Nancy wondered, watching the woman behind the fence.

Just then the old lady awakened and for a moment sat up straight in her wheelchair.

"Oh dear!" she said. "I thought—I guess I dreamed I was—"

Her wrinkled chin twitched and she leaned back with closed eyes. Tears crept from under her lids.

Nancy was about to speak when she spotted a white figure hurrying down the hill. The nurse!

"So there you are!" she said harshly, drawing near the old woman. "I thought so! Trying to hide again!"

A sob escaped the elderly patient.

"Come now, stop that crying!" the nurse commanded. "If you act like a baby, you will have to be treated like one."

The old lady lifted a fragile, blue-veined hand in protest, but let it drop limply.

"Very well, Mistress Contrary, you may sit there for half an hour," the nurse snapped. "Lucky for you I'm tender-hearted, or I'd take some of your privileges away. See that you're here when I come back." She strode up the hill.

As the patient closed her eyes wearily, Nancy edged closer. "Mrs. Eldridge! Mrs. Eldridge!"

The old lady's eyes snapped open and she looked wildly about her.

"Here I am on the other side of the fence, behind the trees," Nancy said. "Listen closely, I will bring you help."

"How do you know my name? Who are you?" Mrs. Eldridge whispered.

Nancy moved closer. Quickly she told the woman who she was, then explained how she had identified her.

Mrs. Eldridge clasped her thin hands. “Bless you, child,” she said, “but you can do nothing.”

“Yes, we can,” said Nancy, speaking with confidence. “But you must be brave and ready to follow instructions.”

Bess and George had moved up to Nancy, who quickly introduced them.

“We’ll all help you, Mrs. Eldridge,” Bess said.

“You can trust Nancy.” George spoke cheerfully, despite the pain in her ankle.

The old woman smiled. “What brave young girls!” Her chin lifted and a glint came into her eyes. “All right. I’ll do my part.”

Nancy glanced uneasily up the hill. “We’d better stay out of sight while we’re talking.”

The girls stepped back and crouched down behind the brush. “Tell us where your room is,” Bess urged. “We’ll get you out, then call the police and they can rush the place.”

“No, no!” exclaimed Mrs. Eldridge. “We’ve all been warned that if strangers try to enter the grounds, we’ll be locked in the cellar.”

“The police would find you,” George said.

“Yes, but some of the women here are heart cases. Many of them could not stand the shock. Hush! Dr. Bell is coming!”

“Bell!” thought Nancy, recalling the bluebell code message.

Quickly the girls slipped back among the trees and watched. Striding down the slope was a tall, distinguished-looking man in a black suit. He had smooth gray hair and a pointed beard.

He spoke in honeyed tones to the old woman. “Well, well, what has upset our dear patient?” he asked, bending over and gallantly kissing her hand. “I’m afraid you fret too much. However, I must tell Miss Tyson to be less strict with our favorite guest. Shall I call Luther and have him wheel you through the gardens?”

“No, just leave me alone.” Mrs. Eldridge sighed.

“Yes, that is what you need—rest and quiet,” Dr. Bell agreed. “But,” he went on, “we must talk business. Shall we get over that little matter of signing the transfer papers now?”

“Your proposition is nothing short of robbery, and I will not consent,” Mrs. Eldridge replied, sitting bolt upright.

“Dear me, how harsh you are,” Dr. Bell said soothingly. “When you came here, you had every confidence in me. You entered this place of your own accord. You didn’t give your relatives any idea where you were going. Didn’t you agree to that as part of your treatment?”

“Fool that I was, yes!” snapped Mrs. Eldridge. “But you haven’t kept your part of the bargain to me or to any of the other ladies. You promised a special secret treatment—so secret you don’t want anybody to know about it. That’s why you have this isolated place.”

“The special treatment to restore youthful vigor isn’t ready yet,” Dr. Bell replied. “But it will be very expensive. I must have the extra money now.”

“Oh!” Nancy thought. “He’s undoubtedly a fraud!”

“I demand that you let me go,” Mrs. Eldridge cried out.

“We can’t do that,” Dr. Bell said. “It would discredit our sanatorium to have a person leave in a poor state of health. Besides, I have your signed declaration that you are a patient here of your own accord, and that you agree to remain as long as I think necessary. Naturally, I forbid you to go.”

Mrs. Eldridge glanced quickly toward the woods where the girls were concealed. In a loud, clear voice, she said, “You wish me to sign over to you many thousands of dollars, in addition to the three thousand I have already paid you.”

“And why not?” Dr. Bell retorted irritably. “There are other patients whom I have charged more.”

“Well, I suppose that once the papers are signed, I won’t live very long,” the old lady said meaningfully.

“You will feel like a girl again,” Dr. Bell replied.

“I’d rather live without youthful vigor and be out of here!” Mrs. Eldridge said, closing her eyes. “I won’t sign a thing. If you should kill me, you won’t get a cent. That’s all. I wish you would go. I am very tired.”

Nancy saw the doctor’s face turn red. His beard seemed to bristle, and his eyes blazed with rage.

“You’ll sing a different tune if you don’t do as I say,” he fumed. “I’ve wasted enough time on you. I will give you until nine o’clock tonight to come to your senses!”

“Oh, you are a brute,” Mrs. Eldridge cried. “If only some good angel would come to my little room in that hot south corner on the third

floor and rescue me!"

"Say, what are you talking about?" Dr. Bell asked, looking about him suspiciously. "You don't think any angels are listening to your careful directions, do you?"

The girls could not help grinning.

Dr. Bell turned and shouted, "Luther!" A man in a white uniform came out of the gatehouse. "Take Mrs. Eldridge to the porch!" the doctor snapped. "Any word about the new patient?"

"A message arrived by Bird X that she will be here at nine," the attendant said with a wink as he wheeled Mrs. Eldridge away.

Swiftly, the girls made their way toward the car. Nancy took the wheel and headed for the highway. As they drove along, the sun broke through the overcast.

"We're going to Glenville," she said. "It's about five miles from here. George can see a doctor there."

"What about Mrs. Eldridge?" Bess asked.

"No plan yet," Nancy said tersely, "but I'm thinking."

Her companions asked no more questions. When they reached the small town, Bess went with George, while Nancy telephoned Ned from the drugstore. She told him what had happened and alerted him to his part in the plan she had devised.

"You can count on me," he said.

An hour later the girls met in a sandwich shop for a late lunch. "My ankle isn't sprained," George reported. "The doctor put on a bandage and it feels better."

"Good," said Nancy. "Are you ready for danger?" she asked soberly.

"Of course we are," George answered steadily.

"Anything to get those poor old ladies free and home to their families," Bess added.

"Then right after we eat, I'm going shopping, while you two hire a black sedan. You may have to ride to another town for it, so let's meet here about five. Then I'll tell you the plan."

At the appointed time Nancy came hurrying down the street, her arms filled with packages. A black sedan was parked at the curb behind her convertible, where Bess and George were waiting.

"What did you buy?" George asked in amazement.

Nancy grinned. “Black oxfords, a black hat with a heavy veil, gray gloves, and a long black coat much too big for me!”

George’s eyes grew wide. “Nancy! You’re going to dress up like an old lady!”

“That’s right. I’ll be that new patient who is supposed to arrive at nine o’clock. Only I’ll be there early.”

Bess stared at the parcels Nancy was holding. “What’s in that fifth bag?”

“A nurse’s uniform and a pair of horn-rimmed glasses for you,” said Nancy.

Bess gasped. “Me?”

“Yes. You’ll have to drive the car into the sanatorium grounds,” Nancy replied.

“Oh, my goodness,” was all Bess could say. Immediately George offered to go instead, but Nancy said No. “You never can tell what will happen,” she said. “With that bad ankle, you wouldn’t be able to run if it should be necessary.”

Nancy put the packages in the convertible and suggested that they eat supper. They found a small restaurant on a side street and ordered hot sandwiches and milk.

“What’s my part in the plan?” George asked.

“I want you to stay with the convertible—in the clearing where we hid it before,” Nancy said. “Bess may need your help when she brings Mrs. Eldridge out.”

George nodded. “I see. I’ll play it cool.”

“But what about you, Nancy?” asked Bess. “You’re not going to stay in that awful place?”

“Yes. We must get Mrs. Eldridge out before nine o’clock. After that, I’ll give the signal for the rescue of the others. A pigeon will carry it to the deserted Tooker estate where Ned is stationed.”

Nancy glanced at her watch. “There’s no more time to talk now. We must get started.”

With George driving the convertible and Nancy the sedan, they returned to the clearing near Larkspur Lane. There Bess changed into the nurse uniform and Nancy put her costume over her own clothes.

Bess, wearing horn-rimmed glasses, looked stern in her white uniform and cap. Nancy seemed small and frail in the long black coat

and heavily veiled hat.

“I’d never know you!” George exclaimed.

Ten minutes later in the gathering dusk, the sedan reached the gatehouse.

“Now remember to give the password,” Nancy whispered.

Trembling, Bess halted the car in front of the gates as the gatekeeper appeared and chained his Great Dane securely. The huge dog strained at his leash and barked furiously. His master advanced toward the girls.

Suppose the password has been changed?” Nancy thought fearfully.

“What’s the good word?” demanded the watchman hoarsely, stepping closer.

“Singing horses!” Bess whispered, quaking.

CHAPTER XVI

Sleuthing

"SINGING horses," repeated the guard. "Right you are."

Striding up to the gates, he opened them wide. Bess guided the car between the posts and the portals clanged shut.

The password had permitted them to enter!

Both girls heaved sighs of relief as they sped up the gravel driveway. Halfway to the mansion, Nancy spoke.

"Stop. No one can see us from the house yet, and the lodge is concealed by those shrubs."

Bess brought the car to a halt and Nancy said, "Back the car off the drive into that clump of trees, Bess. Good! Lucky there's enough room. Get in as far as you can. Keep on backing—farther. That's fine! Now, you wait here. I'll return as soon as I can!"

"Don't be too long," said Bess, trying not to sound frightened.

Nancy squeezed her friend's hand and slipped out of the car. As she went up the hill, she could hear the dog down at the gatehouse growling.

"I hope he's still chained," she thought.

Near the mansion, Nancy assumed a stooped posture and uncertain walk.

"I must be on my guard," she told herself.

Light streamed out onto the lawn from the windows of the house. Staying in the shadows, Nancy reached the walls of the mansion and made her way around to the back where she found an open door.

Peering through the screen, she saw a wide, dimly lighted hallway with stairs ascending to her left, and guessed that this was a back door to the main corridor. She tested the screen. It was unlatched.

"Now for a trip inside," she murmured. "I hope my new shoes don't squeak."

Quietly she stepped into the hall. Half a dozen wheelchairs stood

about. Two of them had sleeping occupants, but there was no other sign of life.

Nancy moved on tiptoe toward the broad stairway, and had just reached the steps when she heard the tread of feet on the oaken floor. In a flash she darted to an empty wheelchair, and muffled herself in the light woolen blanket left by its last occupant.

"I'll try to look as if I'm asleep," she thought.

At that moment a young woman in a striped uniform entered the hall. Nancy watched her apprehensively, fearing that the hat and veil would excite some comment. The nurse's helper, however, marched by humming to herself, giving none of the chairs a second glance.

As soon as she disappeared through a door, Nancy leaped up and dashed toward the stairs. A white head poked up from the nearest chair, and a cracked voice cried:

"Hi there, my dear. The doctor seems to have more than cured you. Why, you are young again!"

Nancy did not pause, but with hammering heart ran up the steps to the second floor. She quickly glanced around, then started the climb to the next story.

At the top of the stairs, she peered cautiously down the corridor. Empty! Relieved, Nancy tried to get her bearings.

"The south corner room," Mrs. Eldridge had said. "That would be to my right."

Quickly Nancy tiptoed down the hall and stopped before the last door. She bent to look through the keyhole, but could see nothing. Then she turned the knob.

The door was locked!

As Nancy racked her brains to think of a way to open it, she heard footsteps on the stairs. She darted across the hall and tried the handle of the opposite door. It turned, and she stumbled into total darkness. It was not a room, but a small broom closet.

It was a tight squeeze. Nancy did not dare move, for in the brief moment that the closet door was open, she had seen that the floor was filled with pails. Against the wall were mops, brooms, and other cleaning equipment. Her slightest movement would send them clattering to the floor.

With her ear to the door, Nancy waited. The footsteps approached, coming her way. They stopped outside her hiding place!

For an instant she dared not breathe. Then there was the rattle of a key in a lock, and the clink of china on a tray. Nancy guessed that a bedtime snack was being brought to Mrs. Eldridge.

Cautiously she opened the door and saw a white skirt vanish into Mrs. Eldridge's room. Then came Miss Tyson's harsh voice.

"Wake up, Mrs. Eldridge! Here is your medicine and some food. If you don't do as the doctor says, it will be the last snack you'll taste for a long time!"

The patient groaned faintly, and the nurse went on speaking.

"I have some nice hot consommé and toast and rice pudding. Doesn't that make your mouth water? Taste it, and remember that tomorrow there will be only stale bread and warm water for breakfast, lunch, and dinner if you don't obey our dear good Dr. Bell, who is so kind to you."

An idea suddenly occurred to Nancy. "If that nurse is going to lecture Mrs. Eldridge, I'll have some time to act," she decided.

Swiftly Nancy tore a strip from her veil and slipped out of the closet to the opposite door. It stood slightly ajar.

With the piece of net, Nancy plugged the slot in the doorframe into which the bolt of the spring lock fitted. Then she darted back to her hiding place.

"I hope my scheme works," she thought.

As Nancy stepped back and pulled the door shut, she bumped against a broom. The handle fell forward. Quickly Nancy caught it and another broom which toppled.

For a moment she clutched the wooden handles in the dark, her heart pounding. Then, very cautiously, Nancy propped them against the wall again.

"Oo! That's all I need!" she murmured. "One noise and I'll be trapped!"

Miss Tyson remained to threaten Mrs. Eldridge a few minutes more, then left the room. She closed the door, and apparently thinking it was locked, hurried away.

Nancy listened for her to go downstairs, then ran to the door across the hall. Her trick had worked! The bolt had failed to lock! Nancy pushed the door open and stepped into the room.

"Mrs. Eldridge," she said softly.

The old lady was propped up in bed, with two pillows behind her back, contemplating her bedtime snack. With a sigh she pushed aside the tray on her lap.

"Mrs. Eldridge," Nancy whispered again, coming closer to the elderly woman.

The patient looked up and gave a sharp scream. Nancy flew to her side. "Don't be afraid! It's Nancy Drew, the girl who spoke to you through the fence," she whispered, quickly lifting the veil.

"I'm sorry! I—I'm nervous," the old woman gasped. "They have tried their best to frighten me so often. How in the world did you get in?"

"Don't worry about that. The thing to do now is for you to get out of here. I hope no one heard you scream." But as she spoke, she heard someone running down the hall.

"I heard Mrs. Eldridge scream," came Miss Tyson's voice.

"What of it?" said a second speaker.

"I suppose I'll have to chase into her room again," the nurse said irritably.

"I wouldn't bother," came another voice.

"But I can't let anything happen to her," said the nurse.

"She hasn't signed yet?"

"No."

Nancy looked around the room. There was not even a clothes closet to hide in!

Mrs. Eldridge groaned. "Oh child! What will you do?"

As the doorknob turned, Nancy dived under the bed. It was very dusty there and she lay motionless, almost afraid to breathe.

Nancy could see a pair of white leather-shod feet stride into the room and pause at the foot of the bed, a few inches from her nose.

"You screamed!" Miss Tyson said angrily. "Why, Mrs. Eldridge?"

"Oh, did I?" the patient asked in a weak voice. "I am sorry."

"Whether you are sorry or not makes no difference!" Miss Tyson snapped. "There are other patients in the house whom you upset by carrying on that way. Why did you scream?"

"I am really very sorry," Mrs. Eldridge said, trying to find some excuse for her outcry. "It won't happen again."

“I asked you why,” the nurse said sharply.

There was no reply.

“Answer my question!” exclaimed the nurse, stamping her foot and raising a cloud of dust. Nancy pressed the hat veil to her face, trying not to sneeze.

“The—the consommé is very hot,” Mrs. El dridge said. “I burned my tongue.”

“A likely story.” The nurse sniffed. “The broth is not as hot as all that after being carried up from the kitchen. No, that is not the truth, Mrs. Eldridge, and I intend to find out your real reason.”

“Oh, Miss Tyson,” begged the patient, “don’t scold me.”

“I had to make a special trip up here on your account.”

“That’s too bad. I’m sorry.”

“Well, why did you scream? What have you been doing?” rasped the nurse.

“Nothing,” replied the old lady. “I haven’t been out of bed.”

“You’ve been acting funny ever since this afternoon. You’re up to something!” Then the nurse added in a bullying tone, “You know what I’m going to do?”

“What?” asked Mrs. Eldridge.

“Search this room!”

CHAPTER XVII

Attic Hideout

AT THE nurse's words, Nancy froze in horror. From her hiding place under the bed she strained to hear the old woman's reply.

"Well, go ahead and search," quavered Mrs. Eldridge. "What do I care?"

"You spunky old dear!" Nancy thought.

The nurse snorted. "Hmm, I guess it would be a waste of time! Things are beginning to get on my nerves! You, especially!"

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Eldridge said meekly.

"I think you screamed just to make trouble," snapped the nurse, "because you know another patient is due here, and you want to give the place a bad reputation! Well, spare yourself the trouble. The new patient's nurse just telephoned that she will not arrive today."

Nancy nearly groaned. "If someone questions the gatekeeper, I'm sunk!" she thought. "I must get Mrs. Eldridge out of here quickly!"

"I'll give you five minutes to eat. Then it'll be nine o'clock. Zero hour for you, old girl." With an ugly laugh, the nurse stamped out of the room.

Nancy waited until the sound of her footsteps had died away before she crept from her hiding place. Hastily she brushed the dust from her black clothing.

"You were wonderful, Mrs. Eldridge!" she whispered. "Now we must work fast and quietly. Can you walk?"

"Yes. They keep us confined to wheelchairs to weaken us, but I'm still pretty spry. I walk up and down this room for a little exercise. Once I tried to climb out of a ground-floor window, but the vines pulled loose and I fell and dislocated my shoulder."

"Is that how it happened?" Nancy marveled at the elderly woman's courage.

While Mrs. Eldridge talked, Nancy had taken off her long coat, hat, and gloves. Now she helped the woman to put on her own shoes and

Nancy's costume. As she did so, the excited old lady looked at the supper tray.

"Food is cooked with drugs to keep us drowsy all the time," she said. "I eat as little of it as possible."

"How dreadful!" Nancy murmured as she helped her to the door.

"Don't take the main stairs," Mrs. Eldridge whispered. "There is a service flight at the rear end of the hall."

"Are you sure?" Nancy asked.

"Yes. I explored this place in the dark until they took to locking me in at night. By the way, how could you open my door?"

"I'll tell you later," said Nancy. "Come now."

The service stairway was a steep flight of enclosed steps which Mrs. Eldridge had to go down sideways, one at a time.

With maddening slowness, they reached the second floor and saw lights reflected under the door leading to the hall. The stairs squeaked and Nancy's nerves grew tenser. Near the ground floor the staircase divided and Mrs. Eldridge said they should take the left branch.

"The other leads into the kitchen. This one takes you to the cellar landing and the entrance into the garden," she whispered.

A few minutes later they stepped into the open air. As fast as Mrs. Eldridge could go, the two hastened to the car. Nancy's heart leaped with joy when she saw its hulking shadow among the trees.

"Bess!" she whispered. "Any trouble?"

"No, but I thought you'd never come!" Bess choked back tears of relief as she and Nancy helped Mrs. Eldridge into the back of the car.

"You'll have to sit on the floor, and keep your head down," Nancy warned Mrs. Eldridge. "Go now, Bess. Good luck!"

From her hiding place, Nancy strained to hear Mrs. Eldridge's reply

"Oh, Nancy, aren't you coming?" Bess whispered.

"No, I have work to do here."

"Well, for goodness sake, be careful!"

The car moved out of the shadows to the driveway. Nancy followed and watched the red taillights proceed toward the closed gate.

"Oh, I hope there'll be no trouble," she thought. The watchman came out with a flashlight and shone it into Bess's window as she stopped. The dog began to bark frantically.

For what seemed an age, the gatekeeper held the light in Bess's face and Nancy heard him talking, but could not make out the words. *What was the trouble?*

At last he shrugged, opened the gate, and the car shot through. As the red taillights disappeared down the lane, Nancy gave a sigh of relief.

"Now to send Ned the alarm!"

As she turned back toward the house, Nancy saw that it was ablaze with lights. Figures darted back and forth across the illumined windows. Reaching the mansion, Nancy concealed herself in the shrubbery along the foundation. A window above her was suddenly flung open, and Bell's voice rang out.

"Emily, your carelessness is inexcusable!" he thundered. "I am not afraid of the old crone's escaping, but she will give us a pretty hour's work searching the grounds."

"Listen, Simon," Miss Tyson replied. "I can't be everywhere at once."

"You can keep your eyes open," he snapped. "Mrs. Eldridge smuggled her bracelet to that doctor right under your nose!"

"Forget it," the woman retorted. "You've taken in enough money on these old women. Why don't you quit this business? Then we could all leave for South America as you promised."

"Not with several thousand dollars still to be had," Bell snarled. "See that every shrub and bush in this place is combed for Mrs. Eldridge, and when you find her, bring her to me."

"All right."

"We will wring the money out of her tonight!"

Nancy peered upward. She could see Bell's pointed beard thrust from the window. Suppose he saw her? But after a few moments he withdrew his head.

"So they are searching the grounds," Nancy mused. "In that case,

Mrs. Eldridge's room would be the safest place for me."

The Great Dane growled menacingly at the gatehouse. Nancy shivered. Suppose they let him loose!

She edged softly to the rear door by which she and the elderly woman had left, and crept up the steep, dark stairs. When she was halfway to the third story, the door below her was thrown open and a voice asked:

"Has anyone looked in here?"

As light streamed into the stairway, Nancy ran on tiptoe to the top.

"I'll check the third floor," the same woman said.

As she started upward, Nancy whirled and quietly sprinted up the narrow stairs, two steps in one leap. At the top was a low door. The young detective opened it, stepped into blackness, and closed the door softly behind her. From the mustiness she surmised that it was an attic. For a few moments she listened. Silence. Then came a scurrying noise and a squeak. *Mice!*

Nancy felt along the wall until her fingers found a switch. She flicked it on and a single bulb lighted in the middle of a great raftered room. Here and there stood trunks, barrels, and old furniture. Against one wall rested dozens of dismantled bedsteads.

In the middle a ladder led up to rafters and there Nancy could see a partial floor with boxes and piles of newspapers.

Suddenly she noticed a small, round window at one end of the attic. With a gasp Nancy quickly flicked off the light, hoping no one had seen it from the grounds!

She felt her way to the window and looked down. Several flashlights were moving near the outbuildings.

"That's where I'll have to go," she said to herself, "in order to send the alarm to Ned. I must reach the pigeon loft unseen."

Just then she heard a low sigh behind her in the dark attic. It seemed to come from above. "Who could be hiding here? Or maybe it's a prisoner. Morgan!" she thought. "So this is where they're keeping him."

Nancy felt her way back to the ladder and cautiously climbed part way up.

"Morgan—" she whispered.

There was a gasp. "Yes—who is it?"

“Nancy Drew. Are you well enough to move?”

“No,” was the faint reply. “I’m weak.”

Nancy’s heart sank. “Never mind,” she said encouragingly. “I’m going to get you out of here somehow. Just—”

At that moment footsteps clumped on the attic stairs. Nancy scampered up the ladder and felt among the boxes and papers. Just as she crouched down, the light went on.

From a cramped position she saw that Morgan, very pale, lay on a mattress, well-concealed amid the boxes. Scattered at her feet were bits of torn newspaper.

Peering between boxes, she saw two men at the door. One had a thin, pinched face, the other was stout with pale, flabby features.

The big man was puffing. “There’s nobody here, Tarr. All those stairs for nothing!”

“Chief said he saw a light.”

“Chief’s wrong.”

The other man sighed. “We’d better search, anyway.”

Very cautiously, Nancy tried to relieve her cramped muscles. But just as they walked beneath the platform, her foot slipped, pushing a small piece of paper off the platform. As it fluttered down, the two men looked up.

“Morgan?” Tarr called sharply. “You alone?”

The sick man groaned slightly.

“Forget it,” said Jackson. “There’s nobody with him. Probably a mouse disturbed the paper. Place is full of ’em.”

“We ought to search,” the thin man said weakly.

The heavy one grinned craftily. “Let’s not, and say we did.”

The other gave a weak laugh and they left, flicking out the light.

“I’ll be back soon, Morgan,” Nancy promised. As quickly as possible she made her way out of the attic down to the third floor.

“I’ll wait in Mrs. Eldridge’s room,” Nancy decided. “When I hear the searchers come inside, I’ll sneak out to the pigeon loft.”

Softly she turned the knob and stepped into the upper hall.

A startled scream rang out.

“Oh—oh—help!” A crash of crockery froze Nancy in her tracks. The

nurse's helper was in the hallway, staring at Nancy open-mouthed, a tray of broken dishes at her feet.

Nancy darted past her and ran down the main stairs, while behind her she heard the girl shouting the alarm.

A chorus of excited voices came from the second floor, but Nancy reached the veranda without being seen. She ran along its entire length and jumped into the shrubbery, panting. Then, hoping that she would not be seen, Nancy darted across the open lawn to a clump of bushes.

A moment later her heart leaped with alarm. Somewhere nearby she heard the dog sniffing. The next instant the animal broke into frantic barking.

Heavy footsteps raced up and a blinding light focused on Nancy's face.

"Here she is!" a deep voice shouted. "I got her, chief!"

CHAPTER XVIII

The Underground Cell

MORE running steps came closer and stopped outside the bushes.

"Come out of there!" ordered a harsh voice.

Nancy's heart sank. The speaker was Adam Thorne! Knowing resistance was futile, she crept from the brush and stood up in the glare of a powerful flashlight. In the darkness just beyond, Nancy could hear the dog snarling and her captors breathing heavily.

"It isn't the old lady!" came Miss Tyson's voice. "It's Nancy Drew!"

Adam Thorne growled. *"What?* I thought we'd knocked her out of action."

Miss Tyson said in a worried voice, "That's what Tarr and Jackson reported. Tarr himself pushed her—"

"Quiet!" snapped Thorne. "She's tricked us. Take her to the house. We'll lock her up."

Quick as lightning, Nancy plunged out of the light and desperately raced down the hill. Taken by surprise, her captors hesitated, then pounded after her, the dog barking furiously.

Blinded by the sudden change from light to darkness, Nancy stumbled and fell. An instant later the Great Dane leaped on her.

"Grab that leash!" shouted Thorne. The dog was yanked back, then someone jerked Nancy to her feet.

"We'll take her to the house!" panted Thorne.

With the ex-lawyer in the lead, flanked by the nurse and the attendant, and guarded in the rear by the gatekeeper and his dog, Nancy was marched to the mansion. Bell was waiting in the main hall.

"Who is this?" he demanded. "Where's Mrs. Eldridge?"

"We haven't found the old fox yet," Thorne answered. "This is the Drew girl I warned you about."

Bell's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean by trespassing on private property?"

“I meant no harm,” Nancy replied truthfully.

Thorne snorted scornfully. “She’s been spying. It’s your fault, Bell. I told you not to bring Dr. Spire here. If the old woman’s shoulder was dislocated, you should have let it stay that way. Too bad you aren’t a real doctor,” he added unpleasantly. “You could have set it yourself.”

“Never mind that,” Miss Tyson put in sharply. “How did she get in here?”

“Luther, bring the gatekeeper quickly!” Bell ordered. “Just how did you get in, Miss Drew?”

“I came in at the entrance,” Nancy replied. “The larkspur is beautiful—”

“I’m not interested in flowers. I think—” Bell checked himself.

He turned to Adam Thorne and spoke in an undertone, but Nancy, straining her ears, heard him say “password to Larkspur Lane” before their voices became hushed.

After a few minutes the attendant appeared with the gateman. “Jones, have you ever seen this young woman?” Bell demanded, glaring at the man standing before him.

“I? No, sir,” the guard declared, not recognizing Nancy dressed in her own clothes.

“Did anybody come in by the gate tonight?” Bell asked sharply.

Nancy saw fear flicker in the man’s eyes as he met Bell’s hard stare. Through no fault of his own, the gateman had let intruders into the grounds!

Jones swallowed. “Uh-no, chief,” he said. “Nobody came in or out.”

A wave of relief swept over Nancy. No alarm would go out for Mrs. Eldridge. The gang would continue to think she was hiding on the grounds.

“All right,” Bell said. “Get back to the gate.” Then, turning to Thorne, he said, “Let’s continue this in my office.”

Miss Tyson grinned maliciously as she prodded Nancy along and into a large, luxurious room. A thick green carpet covered the floor and in the center stood a large mahogany desk. The walls, paneled in a rich-looking wood, were hung with costly oil paintings.

“Shut the door, Luther,” Bell ordered.

Bell seated himself behind the desk, motioning Nancy to stand opposite him. There was tense silence for a moment. Then Bell

reached for a desk telephone.

"I am going to call the police, Miss Drew, and turn you over to them on a charge of trespassing, breaking, and entering with attempt to steal."

"I wish you would," Nancy replied, "if it is possible over that dummy telephone."

"Didn't I tell you she was sharp-eyed?" Thorne scolded. "You can't fool her. Follow my advice and put her away. This is a waste of time."

"What do you mean? Do you wish to have me summon the police?" Bell blustered. "Why do you call this a dummy telephone?"

"Because, in answer to your first question, I should be happy to be escorted from here under police protection," Nancy retorted. "I know the telephone is a dummy because there are no—"

She checked herself abruptly. No use proving her powers of observation!

"See here, Nancy Drew," Bell said, pointing a finger at her. "Stop all this talk and tell me how you entered these grounds—and why. I know all about you. Sylvan Lake is a long distance from here, and you did not walk."

"There are various ways of traveling."

"Bell, I'm telling you it's just foolishness to try to match wits with this girl," Thorne put in. "I know a way to make her talk—and what's more, I'm sure her illustrious father will pay plenty to get his precious daughter back."

"An excellent idea, Thorne," Bell said with an evil smile. "What would you suggest we do first?"

"Put her in the cistern," said Thorne. "I guess a couple of days without food or drink, down in the dark and cold, with the rats and spiders, will make Miss Drew answer any question we ask."

Miss Tyson laughed harshly, looking straight at Nancy to see if she winced at the prospect. "That will take some of the snap out of her," she said.

A shiver went down Nancy's spine, but she did not change expression.

Bell's cold eyes studied her carefully. "You've caused us a lot of trouble," he said softly. "Because of you we had to give up our other headquarters. My partner Mr. Tooker will not overlook that very readily." Bell toyed with a sharp-pointed letter opener on his desk.

Miss Tyson spoke up. “The pigeon keeper guessed she had found that bird, kept it, and then followed it to Tooker’s. Now I’m sure he was right. Only from the message that pigeon carried could she have learned the password. And I still say she couldn’t have entered without it.”

Luther cleared his throat. “But Jones said—”

“He was lying,” Miss Tyson broke in. “Where’s the car you came in?” she asked Nancy.

Nancy thought it best to keep stalling. The farther away Bess, George, and Mrs. Eldridge got, the safer they would be.

Nancy smiled. “Why don’t you search the grounds for the car?”

“That’s enough!” snapped Bell. “Take her away.”

Nancy knew she was in a hopeless predicament, and reasoned that more was to be gained by strategy than by a desperate attempt to break loose. As she was marched out of the room, she heard Bell say, “The disappearance of the Eldridge woman and the Drew girl showing up have me so upset I can’t think. I’m going upstairs and tell Adolf. Let him handle this. It’s dynamite.”

“Do as you please,” Thorne said coldly.

Nancy, her arms pinned behind her back, was shoved out onto the porch and toward the buildings beyond the house. Just outside the pigeon loft, Thorne stooped and jerked at an iron ring in the ground. It was attached to a round steel lid about three feet in diameter. Beneath it gaped a black hole.

“Well, down you go, Nancy Drew!” Thorne laughed.

Nancy looked around desperately. There was no escape. As the nurse pushed her, the trapped girl was forced to start down a swaying, flimsy wooden ladder into the dark, damp hole. Down, down, ten or twelve feet Nancy went, until she could feel the slimy bottom under her feet.

“This is worse than I bargained for,” she thought ruefully.

The ladder was jerked up and Thorne called, “Don’t worry. You may have it back.”

There was a series of splitting noises, and pieces of the ladder came raining down around Nancy’s head. As she threw up her arms to protect herself, she heard Thorne laugh sardonically.

Then the lid clanged shut!

CHAPTER XIX

Caught!

DESPAIR filled Nancy's heart and she shivered. The dampness of the old cistern covered her like a clammy hand.

She took a deep breath. "Come on now," Nancy scolded herself. "Brace up and try to find a way out!"

Stretching her arms wide, Nancy could feel nothing, so she knew her prison was wider than its three-foot lid. When her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, she noticed tiny gleams of light coming from above. Perhaps the lid did not fit tightly.

"Or maybe it's a phosphorescent glow from some decaying thing," Nancy thought with distaste. "Whatever it is, I must find out."

Balancing herself with outstretched arms, she walked cautiously across the slippery floor. It was uneven and Nancy stepped ankle-deep in cold water. A moment later her fingers brushed the moist stone wall. She stared upward and saw light coming through chinks in the wall directly above her.

"I must try to reach those openings, but how?" Then Nancy remembered the pieces of ladder Thorne had mockingly thrown to her.

"Maybe I can use them after all," she thought. Repressing a shudder, Nancy slid her fingers over the slimy floor for the fragments. "Now's no time to be squeamish."

Finding a piece of wood, Nancy fingered it anxiously for a nail. Feeling one, she pulled it loose from the rotten wood and noted that it was long and strong.

"Maybe this will work, and maybe it won't," she said half-aloud.

To her horror, she was answered by a throaty chuckle. Nancy gasped. As the sound was repeated she dropped the nail, unnerved. Then, fighting for control, the desperate girl located the noise—it was coming from above. Was someone watching through the chinks?

"Kel-ek-koo-oo-oo!" As the new noise blended with the chuckles, Nancy suddenly grinned in relief.

“Pigeons! The light must be coming from the loft!”

Frantically she sought the lost nail. Locating it, Nancy began to dig vigorously at the loose mortar. Soon she had hollowed out space enough to give herself one toehold. A little farther above, Nancy dug again, and repeated the process until she could reach no higher on the wall.

Then she climbed up and chipped out another hold. The mortar was hard and her fingers, clutching the nail, grew cramped. The higher she went, the more difficult the task became.

Finally the imprisoned girl was forced to cling to the damp wall, her toes and the fingers of one hand digging into the niches she had scooped out. With her free hand she scraped a higher grip for herself.

At last Nancy’s fingers found the openings through which the light filtered. A big stone rocked under her hand!

Mingled excitement and alarm shot through her. Here was the way out! “But suppose I can’t move the stone or I fall!” she thought. About eight feet below was the stone floor of the cistern.

Nevertheless, Nancy forced herself to try pushing the stone aside. She failed, but suddenly it came loose and fell inward over her head. As the stone plummeted down, it grazed her shoulder, but Nancy managed to grab the top edge of the hole and hold tight.

With a sigh of relief she pulled herself through the enlarged opening and up to freedom! On the earthen floor of the pigeon loft, the young sleuth fell back exhausted and closed her eyes. A few moments later she opened them to the sound of fluttering wings and sleepy cooing. The loft was lighted by a large bright bulb under a small cage containing a pigeon.

“This is the sick bird,” Nancy conjectured, “and it is being kept warm.”

Capsules for messages lay on a shelf. “Good,” Nancy thought. She took a pencil and small pad from her blouse pocket and wrote three identical messages: “SP at once.” Nancy inserted them in the capsules, then caught a pigeon and attached the capsule to its anklet. Quickly she caught another bird, then a third.

“I’d better turn out the light for a few minutes so I won’t be seen releasing these pigeons,” she decided, and unscrewed the bulb.

Nancy now felt her way to the door, opened it, and released the birds. “Fly straight to Ned,” she muttered. “He’s waiting at the Tooker estate.”

Hoping no one had seen the light go off, Nancy turned the bulb on again and fled from the coop to the carriage-house garage.

Here she considered her next move. Nancy knew there must be lights on the landing field, because the gang used their plane at night. “But how do they turn them on? Perhaps at a switchbox in here?”

She opened the door wide enough to squeeze through and saw two large sedans. One was the old car used to kidnap Dr. Spire. Walking past it, Nancy glanced inside and stopped short. She had glimpsed a white blur! Was it a face she saw?

Nancy turned quietly and stepped nearer. As she stared, a figure in one corner of the back seat moved. Someone was seated there, bound and gagged. Quickly Nancy opened the car door. Removing the gag, she asked, “Morgan, how did you get here?”

“They brought me down,” he said hoarsely. “Thorne’s going to finish me off to keep me from talking. But they’ll do it where no one will find me.” He breathed heavily. “The gang’s ready to escape. Tooker has given the signal to clear out.”

“How soon?” asked Nancy as she quickly worked at his bonds.

“I don’t know,” he whispered. “Soon.”

“What about the patients?”

“They’ll herd ’em into the cellar.” Anger gave the weakened man strength to continue. “The gang isn’t worried about them. They figure the shock’ll kill some of the old ladies and the rest’ll be too confused and terrified to be much help to the police.”

“Those men are brutes!” Nancy exclaimed. “They mustn’t get away!”

Quickly she climbed from the car and took the nail from her pocket. Nancy inserted it into a tire valve, holding it open until all the air had hissed out. She did the same to the rest of the tires on both cars, then hurried back to Morgan.

“Do you know how they turn on the landing-field lights?” she asked.

“Big oak,” he said weakly, “at the edge of the field. Switch box nailed to the tree.”

“I must turn them on,” she said. “I’ll be back!”

Nancy dashed from the carriage house and ran down the hill toward the level field at the bottom. The moon was coming up and the sloping lawn was bathed in pale light.”

"If only they don't see me!"

From somewhere behind Nancy came the deepthroated bark of the Great Dane. Was he loose on the grounds? she wondered.

At one end of the landing field, Nancy could see the plane and at the other a clump of trees. She angled left and pounded down toward them.

Reaching the shadow of the trees, she stopped and tried to spot the oak. Again, she heard the dog's bark—this time closer.

Nancy looked back.

The huge beast was silhouetted on the brow of the hill, straining against a leash held by the gatekeeper. He began pulling the man down the slope.

"Does he scent me?" Nancy tried not to think about it, and pressed deeper into the clump of trees.

There was the oak! And gleaming in the moonlight a metal box nailed to the trunk! Nancy darted to it, opened the door, and pulled the single switch inside.

Out on the field, spots of light were coming up through the short grass. "Clever," she thought. "They're sunk in the earth, and aren't noticeable in daylight. Now for the plane!"

The far side of the landing area was bordered by woodland. Nancy ran from her shelter to the woods, then hastened along the edge of the field, keeping within the tree line. At the far end, she crouched low, dashed across the clearing, and crept under the low wing of the small plane.

Nancy knew that the fuel drains were on the underside of the wings. She felt along the surface until her fingers encountered a T-shaped metal valve.

"This must be it," she decided, and pressed upward. A stream of fuel flowed to the ground! Nancy found that by turning the valve slightly she could lock it open. Then she hurried to the other wing and did the same thing.

"Now," Nancy said to herself, "that should ground the gang! I'll get back to Morgan and hide him before the men go to the cars."

As she started to move, however, Nancy heard the Great Dane growling. Coming down the field were the dog and the gatekeeper, with four men running behind them. Nancy recognized Thorne, Bell, and Luther, but the fourth was a tall stranger. As they drew nearer,

she saw he had a gaunt, cruel face, and guessed he was Adolf Tooker.

"I'm telling you I didn't turn on the lights," came Luther's voice.

"Well, somebody did," Thorne growled. "Jones, can't you shut that dog up?"

"There's a prowler down here," replied the gateman. "That's what's the matter with him."

As the party reached the plane, they stopped less than thirty feet from Nancy. The dog strained toward her hiding place, whining.

Nancy took a deep breath. "I'm really in a tight spot!" she thought. If she moved from the shadow of the plane's wing, the men would see her. If she didn't, the dog would attack her!

Suddenly shouts came from the hillside and Nancy saw the bobbing rays of flashlights. "Wait for me!" called Miss Tyson. "Something's gone wrong!" her shrill voice warned.

The tall man said sharply, "Jones, take that dog and find out what the trouble is! We'll search down here for the prowler."

As the gatekeeper pulled the dog away, louder shouts came from the hillside and the four men looked up toward the moving lights.

"It's now or never!" Nancy thought. Crouching low, she ran out on the moonlit field.

CHAPTER XX

The SP

NOT daring to look back, Nancy raced for the shelter of the woods, wondering if she could make it before being detected.

Suddenly she heard a hoarse shout. “Look, chief! There goes a girl!”

The young sleuth’s heart sank.

“Catch her!” Thorne yelled.

“No, you fool,” barked Bell. “We haven’t time! Into the plane, everybody! Go ahead, Adolf!”

“Wait!” came the tall man’s hard voice. “I smell gasoline.”

Thorne gave an angry exclamation and Bell said, “I do, too. Where’s it coming from?”

“There’s probably a leak in one of the fuel tanks,” said Luther. Quickly he ducked under the wing. “One drain valve is open!” he shouted.

“Open?” thundered Bell. “Who did that?”

At once Thorne climbed into the plane. In a moment he gave an angry yell. “We have no fuel!” he cried and jumped out. “The gauges read empty!”

Miss Tyson raced up to them with three men and a girl at her heels, followed by the gatekeeper and his barking dog.

“Everything’s gone wrong!” she exclaimed.

At that moment a plane swooped soundlessly out of the sky. Before it taxied to a full stop, several armed State Police officers jumped out and surrounded the criminals. A powerful searchlight was turned on the confused gang.

A voice over a loudspeaker ordered, “Stand where you are! No one move!”

“Ned!” Nancy cried out.

She raced from the woods and reached the plane as he leaped from it, followed by Dave, her father, and the pilot.

“Dad!” Nancy exclaimed as Carson Drew caught her up in his arms.

“Are you hurt?” he asked quickly.

“No, Dad, but I’m so glad to see you! Ned, you’re just wonderful!”

“Oh, Nancy, you take such chances,” he said. “But I was sure happy I could come to the rescue.”

In a moment a second noiseless plane skimmed down onto the field. Out jumped Burt, Lieutenant Mulligan, and two members of his detective squad. They joined the others in the circle of light, where the officers began snapping handcuffs on the prisoners.

“Miss Drew,” Lieutenant Mulligan said, “Ned Nickerson informed me of your plan and I called the State Police.”

“I’m glad the mystery is solved, Lieutenant,” said Nancy, then turned to Thorne. “Where are the old ladies?” she asked anxiously.

The gang members had been staring at Nancy in disbelief. “You!” Thorne sputtered. “How did you get out of the cistern?”

“First answer my question,” said Nancy.

“They’re in the cellar,” Bell replied shortly.

Miss Tyson spoke up. “They are not in the cellar.” As Bell looked at her, puzzled, she added, “I didn’t have time to put them there! As soon as I saw the air was out of our car tires, I knew something had gone wrong with the plans. I wanted to get away—fast!”

“What did you do with Morgan?” Nancy asked quickly.

“Nothing. He’s still in the car.”

Nancy explained Morgan’s condition to the police, who promised that the houseman would be taken to a hospital.

Thorne glared at Nancy. “How did you get out of the cistern?”

“Climbed out,” Nancy said directly. “I used the ladder you gave me.”

Miss Tyson gasped. “That’s impossible.”

Briefly, Nancy told how she had escaped and sent for help.

“‘SP at once,’ ” Ned said with a grin. “Sail-plane at once!”

“Also, send police,” Nancy added.

“These aren’t gliders?” Tooker asked.

“No,” Ned answered. “They’re motorized sailplanes. They were perfect for this job because we flew them here using the motor, then

cut it out and landed soundlessly."

He grinned at Dave. "All we had to do was find two sailplanes. We finally rented these from an airport in the next county. The State Police provided the pilots."

"Dad," said Nancy, "how did you hear about the plan?"

"Ned briefed me. He called our house on the chance that I'd returned from Chicago." Looking at Adam Thorne, Mr. Drew added, "I'm proud of my daughter, Thorne. She planned to take you and your accomplices by surprise, so you couldn't harm the old ladies before you bolted."

Lieutenant Mulligan cleared his throat. "Miss Drew, you're a fine detective."

Nancy smiled and thanked him.

Adolf Tooker turned to Bell and said angrily, "This is the girl you said would be no trouble?"

"I warned Bell about her," Thorne spoke up, "but he wouldn't listen!"

"It's not my fault," said Bell, his voice rising nervously. "It's Thorne's. Ever since he read about the Comings' jeweled crystal collection he wanted to steal it. Then he dragged us into the scheme and bungled it! My men were doing all his work!

"Whenever I wanted Tarr and Jackson, they were trailing Nancy Drew in the sedan or spying on that Sylvan Lake place. They even set the dog on her. Twice they snatched Morgan, and Jackson showed the blue fire night after night to scare him. It finally worked. Then suddenly Morgan wouldn't go along with us, so we had to teach him a lesson.

"As for Tarr," Bell went on bitterly, "he spent days making the firework wheel and rigging up an asbestos-lined box for it."

Tarr gave a sickly grin. "All I had to do was shut the door of the box and the blue fire was gone—like magic!"

Jackson's face was pale. "We only did what Thorne ordered."

"Be quiet, all of you!" barked Thorne. "Don't you know there are police listening?"

"It doesn't matter," Adolf Tooker said wearily. "They'll find all the evidence they need here."

"Is this your whole gang?" Mulligan asked sharply.

Tooker looked around the group which included the gateman with the dog, the pigeon keeper, and the nurse's aide whom Nancy had startled in the hall.

"Yes."

Miss Tyson's assistant was shaking with fright. "I was only doing what Dr. Bell ordered. He told me the patients were too nervous to have visitors."

"He's no doctor," Nancy told her. "And I find it hard to believe Miss Tyson is a real nurse."

The hard-faced woman shot her a venomous look.

"The police will find out about them all," Lieutenant Mulligan said grimly.

At that moment two helicopters appeared, lights flashing. They landed on the field and the rotors were silenced.

"Last stage of Nancy's plan," Ned said. "Reinforcements!"

"Okay," called a State Police officer to the arriving troopers. "Load this gang in the copters and take 'em away!"

An hour later Nancy had the biggest thrill of the evening. As she walked into the Comings' living room with her father and the boys, she saw Mrs. Eldridge seated in a big chair with little Marie asleep on her lap. At one side stood the child's mother, on the other a tall stranger.

"Nancy," the old woman said happily, "this is my nephew John. Nancy Drew is the girl who—" Tears filled her eyes and she could not go on.

"Yes," he said, "Nancy Drew has done a wonderful job. Thank you, Nancy."

"The hospital called," said Mrs. Corning. "Morgan will be all right! We're so grateful to you for clearing up the mystery about him."

"Will you take him back?" Bess asked.

"Of course. He is honest and faithful. We know his true story. There can't be any more trouble."

Nancy thanked her friends for helping her. She gave Bess and George each a squeeze and quickly excused herself to change her clothes. When she came downstairs, Mrs. Corning had a tray of tempting food waiting.

"Oh good!" said Nancy. "Supper was a long time ago. I'm

famished!"

While everyone ate, Mrs. Eldridge told what she had learned while a prisoner at Larkspur Lane. Tooker, whose real name was Van Hofwitz, was an international confidence man.

"The sanatorium was his idea," she said. "He made Bell a partner and he was to pass as a doctor. Thorne had put money into the venture while in prison. As soon as he escaped, he joined the others."

Mrs. Eldridge went on to say that Von Hofwitz ingratiated himself into various social circles. He would introduce the fake doctor to wealthy ladies who complained of old age.

"I see now how silly I was," Mrs. Eldridge said. "I was taken in by their suave manners and my own vanity."

She revealed that the unscrupulous pair would persuade the women to go secretly to the sanatorium. There, using drugs and threats, Bell prevailed upon the patients to sign away large parts of their wealth to him.

Mr. Drew spoke up. "Thorne is a very sharp lawyer and no doubt the contracts he drew for you women to sign seemed harmless enough but could not be changed, even if your relatives tried to break them."

"But your courage, Mrs. Eldridge," said Nancy, "helped to put an end to the whole scheme. There are two questions I hope you can answer," she added. "Why did the gang use *blue* bells in the code?"

"Because Bell was so conceited he wanted his own name in it. Blue, of course, was the color of the flowers growing so profusely around the estate."

"And why was the pigeon released from the plane?"

"Tooker was flying from the mansion to an appointment with an old woman in Pennsylvania that day. He let the bird go on the way so that it would reach his estate more quickly."

"Thank you, Mrs. Eldridge, for the answers to my questions," Nancy said. "And now I'll go upstairs and get your bracelet for you."

"No, dear," said the old lady. "I want you to keep it as a memento."

"How wonderful!" Nancy hugged her.

Mr. Corning spoke up. "And I am going to order French crystal earrings in the form of tiny larkspurs for you and the other girls."

"Oh, how exciting!" Bess exclaimed. "Thank you very much."

George grinned and added her thanks.

Nancy protested that she wanted no reward. “I’m just happy everything turned out right.”

Ned grinned. “If I were to give Nancy the reward she’d like best, I’d hand her another mystery to solve.”

But it was not Ned who would bring *The Clue of the Broken Locket* to Nancy, though he was to play a part in the strange case.

“I’ll find you a mystery by tomorrow morning,” he promised jokingly.

“And I’ll be ready for it,” Nancy said with a twinkle in her eyes. “But make it very, very complicated and original.”

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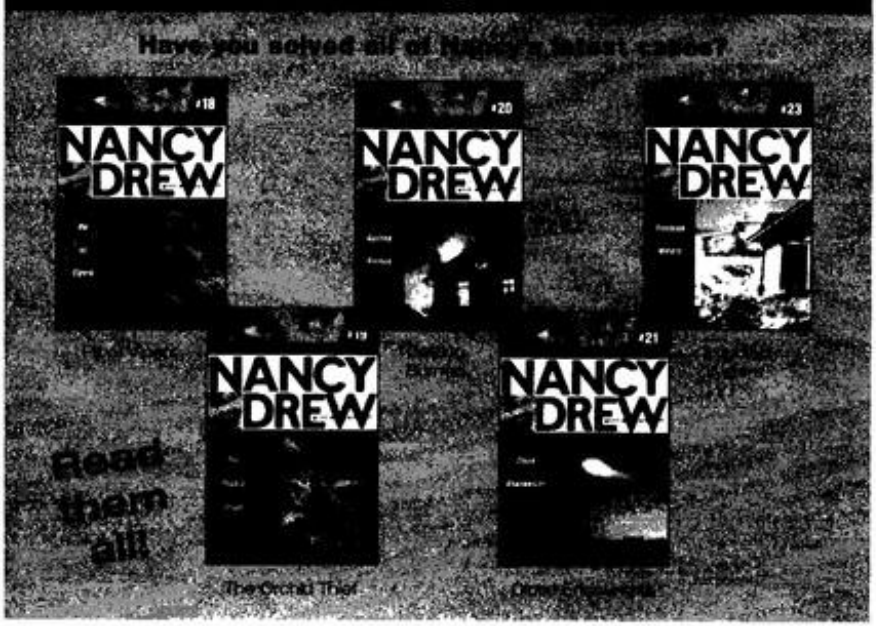

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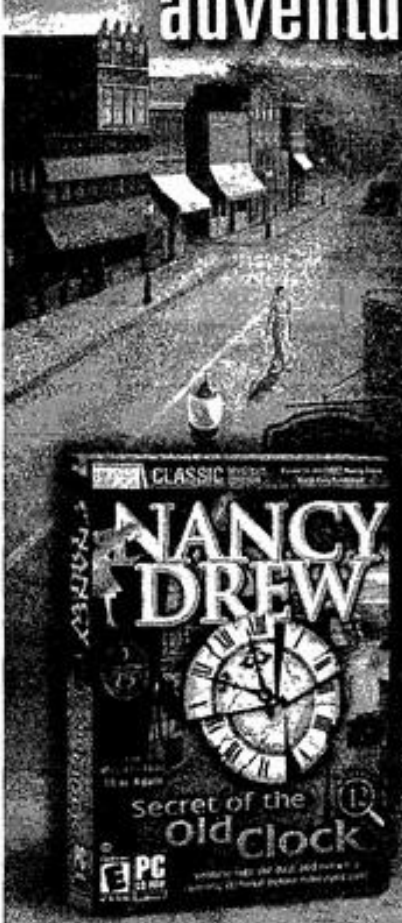

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